川上稔

イラスト・さとやす（TENKY）

GENESISシリーズ

境界線上のホライゾン

きみとあさまで

II 下

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川上稔

イラスト・さとやす（TENKY）

GENESISシリーズ

境界線上のホライゾン

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特-4

HONNEAMISE

GENESISシリーズ 境界線上のホライゾン

きみとあさまでⅡ〈下〉

川上　稔

特典文庫

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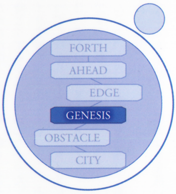

The 1st.GENESIS

NOT FOR SALE

川上　稔（かわかみ　みのる）

1975年1月3日生まれ。東京出身。１期の最終巻ということでこの特典小説の執筆も一段落かと思いきや、実はもうⅢ〈上〉の原稿はほとんど書き上がっているんだとか……。

【特典文庫】

GENESISシリーズ境界線上のホライゾン
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イラスト:さとやす（TENKY）

山形生まれの栃木育ち「枝豆味スナックは大抵おいしい。たまにしょっぱすぎるのもあるけど」あれ醤油系のヤツいいですよねー。

© 川上稔／アスキー・メディアワークス／境界線上のホライゾン製作委員会

カバー／旭印刷

inside story

『浅間で浸かって』

「ねえ、湯沸かし器つけないの？　ＩＺＵＭＯが神社専用のものを作ってるわよね？」

浅間神社の泉。木枠で囲まれた縁に、喜美が肘をついて言うのを、浅間は聞いた。

自分がいるのは泉の脱衣場。先ほど蹴り落として濡れた二人の制服を、脱衣場に紐吊しにし終わったばかりだ。我ながら、憮然とした表情の自覚つきで泉に戻れば、まず言うべきは、

「喜美、お願いですから非常識な方法でうちに入ってくるのやめてください」

「え!?　じゃあ、舐めるのはいいのね!?　凄いわ浅間！　今度愚弟にも教えてあげないと！　ナイス！　ナイステイスティング！　下から上に舐めた方が反応いいわよね！」

泉の中で、体を温めるためのワインを飲んでいたミトツダイラが吹いた。

「わ、我が王に何させる気ですの!?　い、犬みたいな事させるなんて、許しません！　許しませんわよ!?　どっちかっていうと智の方が御禊として舐めるべきでしょうに！」

「何言ってんですかミトも！」

「つーか、そりゃあミトツダイラがしたい方だものねえ……。でもミトツダイラ、アンタ、さっきから浅間神社製のワインそんなに飲んでて大丈夫？」

「え？　だって、身体が冷えてしまいますもの」

「あの、ミト、うち、ボイラー入れてないので制服は自然乾燥なんですけど……」

「は？　じゃあ、その分だけ、待てばいいんですのよね？」

浅間は喜美と、顔を見合わせた。ややあってから、浅間がミトツダイラに、

「うち、洗面所は母屋ですよ？」

言った向こう、ややあってから、ミトツダイラが慌てて瓶の残量を確認した。半ば以上が減ってるのを見ると、

「ちょ！　ちょっと！　何で先に注意しませんの!?」

「いや、私、二人の制服を干してたので……」

「フフ、逃げた！　逃げたわね浅間！　いいわ、私も〝どうせそんなこったろうと思ったし、ミトツダイラがそういう時どうするか見て勉強したかった〟なんて今更言えるわけないもの！　今日はこれからミトツダイラ主導のプレイしましょう！　それが友情ってものよ――！」

喜美が、縁に寝っ転がってしなを作ると、ミトツダイラに向けて自分の胸を一つ叩く。

「さーあバッチ来――ぃ!!　来るのよカマ――ン!!」

「何を妙な期待してるんですの一体……！」

「フフ、いいから全部飲んじゃいなさいよ。でも空瓶は大事にするのよ！　後で使うから！」

「しません！　しませんわよ絶対に！」

と、ぎゃあぎゃあやってる二人を余所に、浅間は体を洗い直そうと思う。すると、

「あ！　何よ浅間！　舐めキスマーキング落とす気!?　今日は朝、リップクリーム切らしてて愚弟の借りたっていうのに！　あ、一応は白砂製のやつね？」

「何してるんですの喜美は――！」

ホントに御禊の場で何してるんでしょうねー、と浅間は朝からしみじみ思った。

inside story

GENESISシリーズ
境界線上のホライゾン

きみとあさまでⅡ〈下〉

川上　稔

特典文庫

GENESISシリーズ　境界線上のホライゾン　きみとあさまでⅡ〈下〉

川上　稔

特典文庫

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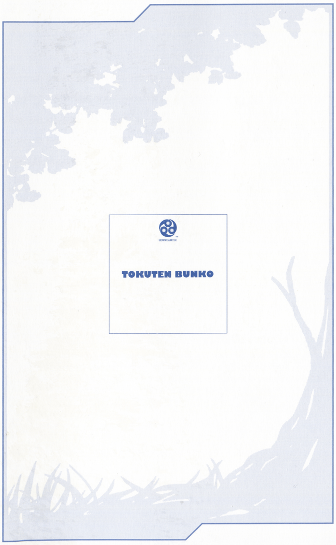

TOKUTEN BUNKO

Inside Story

Soaking with Asama

“Hey, why not install a water-heater? IZUMO makes ones for shrine use, don’t they?”

Asama heard Kimi speaking while resting her elbow on the edge of the wooden frame surrounding the Asama Shrine’s spring.

Asama was inside the changing area. She had just finished hanging up the two uniforms which had gotten wet after being kicked into the water before. She returned to the spring while well aware of the astonished look on her face.

“Kimi, please stop entering here in such absurd ways.”

“Eh!? Then you want some licking first!? You’re amazing, Asama! I need to tell my foolish brother! Nice! Nice tasting! I suppose you *would* respond better after being licked from all over!”

In the spring, Mitotsudaira spat out the wine she had been drinking to warm herself.

“Wh-what are you trying to get my king to do!? I-I will not let you turn him into a dog! I will not allow it! And if anything, shouldn’t Tomo lick him as a form of purification!?”

“What are *you* saying Mito!?”

“Yeah, I guess you would be the one that wants to do the licking, Mitotsudaira… Anyway, are you sure you should be drinking the Asama Shrine’s wine?”

“Eh? But I was feeling chilled.”

“Um, Mito, we don’t have a boiler, so your uniform will have to air dry…”

“Hm? Doesn’t that just mean I have to wait a little longer?”

Asama and Kimi exchanged a glance and finally Asama spoke to Mitotsudaira.

"Our bathroom is in the main building."

Mitotsudaira finally checked to see how much was left in the bottle and found over half of it was gone.

"W-wait! Why didn't you warn me earlier!?"

"Well, I was out hanging your uniforms up to dry…"

"Heh heh. You're dodging responsibility! Aren't you, Asama!? Yes, I understand you don't want to admit you had a feeling this would happen but wanted to see how Mitotsudaira would handle the situation! Let's use Mitotsudaira for our fun for the day! That's true friendship!"

Kimi lay flirtatiously on the edge of the spring, faced Mitotsudaira, and then slapped her own chest.

"Now, bring it on!! C'mooooon!!"

"What in the world are you hoping is going to happen!?"

"Heh heh. Hurry up and finish off that wine. But take good care of the empty bottle! You'll need it later!"

"I will not! I will not need it!"

As the other two argued, Asama decided to wash her body again. And then…

"Ah! What do you think you're doing, Asama! Don't think you can wash off the marks from your licking kisses! Especially since I ran out of lip balm this morning and had to borrow my foolish brother's! Oh, but it was a Shirasago product, okay?"

"What are you doing, Kimi!?"

Really, though. What are we doing in this place of purification? wondered Asama so early in the morning.

Title Page

気がつけば戦ったり調査したり
どんな学生生活ですかと思いつつ
紆余曲折の踊り場へ御案内——

境界線上のホライゾン

Horizon on the Middle of Nowhere

きみとあさまで

第十六章『空上の見据え者』……………………P5
第十七章『敵上の上級者』………………………P37
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II

下

川上 稔

イラスト・さとやす（TENKY）

デザイン：渡邊宏一（2725 Inc.）

The next thing you know, you’re fighting, investigating

And wondering what kind of student life you’re living

But it is all a winding path to the dance stage

Kimitoasamade

Chapter 16: Viewer in the Sky – P5

Chapter 17: Experienced One on the Enemy – P37

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II

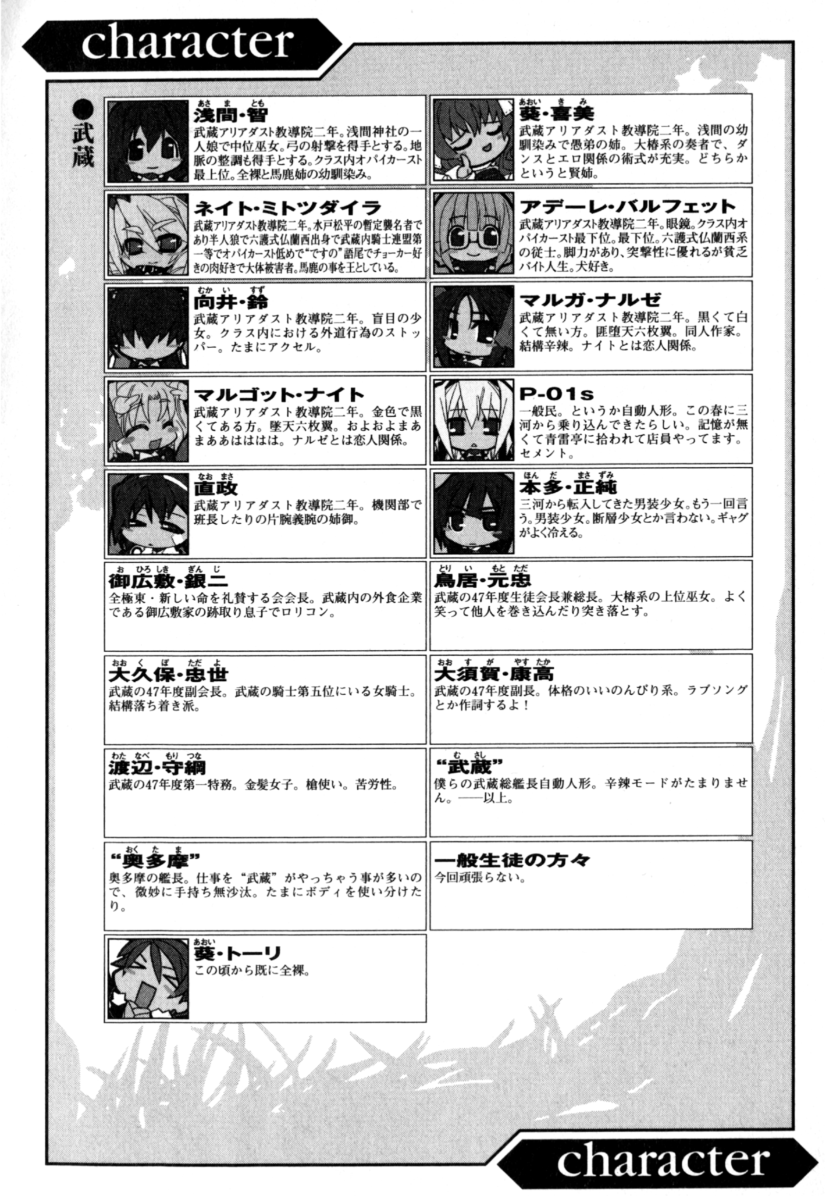
B

Kawakami Minoru

Illustrations: Satoyasu (TENKY)

Design: Watanabe Kouichi (2725 Inc)

Characters



character

● 武蔵

浅間・智
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。浅間神社の一人娘で中位巫女。弓の射撃を得手とする。地脈の整調も得手とする。クラス内オパイカースト最上位。全裸と馬鹿姉の幼馴染み。

葵・喜美
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。浅間の幼馴染みで愚弟の姉。大椿系の奏者で、ダンスとエロ関係の術式が充実。どちらかというと賢姉。

ネイト・ミトツダイラ
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。水戸松平の暫定襲名者であり半人狼で六護式仏蘭西出身で武蔵内騎士連盟第一等でオパイカースト低めで“ですの”語尾でチョーカー好きの肉好きで大体被害者。馬鹿の事を王としている。

アデーレ・バルフェット
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。眼鏡。クラス内オパイカースト最下位。最下位。六護式仏蘭西系の従士。脚力があり、突撃性に優れるが貧乏バイト人生。犬好き。

向井・鈴
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。盲目の少女。クラス内における外道行為のストッパー。たまにアクセル。

マルガ・ナルゼ
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。黒くて白くて無い方。匪堕天六枚翼。同人作家。結構辛辣。ナイトとは恋人関係。

マルゴット・ナイト
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。金色で黒くてある方。墜天六枚翼。およおよまあまああはははは。ナルゼとは恋人関係。

P-01s
一般民。というか自動人形。この春に三河から乗り込んできたらしい。記憶が無くて青雷亭に拾われて店員やってます。セメント。

直政
武蔵アリアダスト教導院二年。機関部で班長したりの片腕義腕の姉御。

本多・正純
三河から転入してきた男装少女。もう一回言う。男装少女。断層少女とか言わない。ギャグがよく冷える。

御広敷・銀二
全極東・新しい命を礼賛する会会長。武蔵内の外食企業である御広敷家の跡取り息子でロリコン。

鳥居・元忠
武蔵の47年度生徒会長兼総長。大椿系の上位巫女。よく笑って他人を巻き込んだり突き落とす。

大久保・忠世
武蔵の47年度副会長。武蔵の騎士第五位にいる女騎士。結構落ち着き派。

大須賀・康高
武蔵の47年度副長。体格のいいのんびり系。ラブソングとか作詞するよ！

渡辺・守綱
武蔵の47年度第一特務。金髪女子。槍使い。苦労性。

“武蔵”
僕らの武蔵総艦長自動人形。辛辣モードがたまりません。──以上。

“奥多摩”
奥多摩の艦長。仕事を“武蔵”がやっちゃう事が多いので、微妙に手持ち無沙汰。たまにボディを使い分けたり。

一般生徒の方々
今回頑張らない。

葵・トーリ
この頃から既に全裸。

character

● Musashi

- Asama Tomo: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. The only daughter of the Asama Shrine and a mid-level shrine maiden. Specializes in archery and in tuning ley lines. Stands at the top of the class's boob caste system. Childhood friends with the nudist and his stupid sister.

- Aoi Kimi: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Asama's childhood friend and her foolish brother's older sister. An Ootsubaki-style musician with plenty of dancing and sexuality spells. More considerate than anything.
- Nate Mitotsudaira: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Provisional inheritor of the Mito Matsudaira name, a half-werewolf, from Hexagone Française, rank 1 member of Musashi's knight's league, low on the boob caste system, speaks in a somewhat noble fashion, likes chokers, likes meat, and generally the victim. Calls the idiot her king.
- Adele Balfette: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Glasses. Lowest on the class's boob caste system. Yes, lowest. An Hexagone Française style of vassal. Has leg strength and can perform an excellent assault, but lives a poor part-timer's life. Loves dogs.
- Mukai Suzu: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Blind girl. Stopper for the horrible actions of the class. Sometimes accelerates them instead.
- Malga Naruze: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Black and white and has nothing. Six-winged fallen angel. Doujin author. Fairly bitter. In a relationship with Naito.
- Margot Naito: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Gold and black and has plenty. Six-winged descended angel. Oh, dear. Oh, my. Ah ha ha ha ha ha. In a relationship with Naruze.
- P-01s: A normal citizen. Or rather, an automaton. Apparently boarded the Musashi at Mikawa this spring. Has no memories, was taken in by the Blue Thunder, and works there. Cement-like.
- Naomasa: A second year at Musashi Ariadust Academy. Barely appears so there might be no point in putting her here. Works as a team leader in the engine division and has one false arm.
- Honda Masazumi: Crossdressing girl who transferred in from Mikawa. Let me say that again: crossdressing girl. No, that doesn't mean she wears a cross. Her gags get icy reactions.
- Ohiroshiki Ginji: President of the Far Eastern Council for the Worship of New Life. Heir to the Ohiroshiki family that runs a food service company on Musashi. Lolicon.
- Torii Mototada: Musashi's '47 Student Council President and Chancellor. An upper level Ootsubaki-style shrine maiden. Laughs a lot, gets other people caught in the middle, and pushes them off.

- Ookubo Tadayo: Musashi’s ’47 Vice President. A female knight ranked fifth among Musashi’s knights. A fairly composed person.
- Oosuga Yasutaka: Musashi’s ’47 Vice Chancellor. A well-built carefree person. Writes love songs!
- Watanabe Moritsuna: Musashi’s ’47 1st Special Duty Officer. Blonde girl. Uses a spear. A worrier.
- “Musashi”: Our overall captain automaton. Her sharp-tongued mode is the best. Over.
- “Okutama”: Caption of Okutama. “Musashi” tends to do a lot of the work, so she often ends up emptyhanded. Sometimes uses different bodies for different uses.
- Normal Students: Aren’t going to work hard this time.
- Aoi Toori: Already a nudist at this point.

Glossary

・**襲名**:歴史再現のために適格者が歴史上の人物を襲名すること。

・**術式**:流体を加工することで空間中に奇跡を起こすこと。

・**白砂台座**:出雲産業座の神社系ブランド。

・**神格武装**:通常の武装とは違い、特有の能力を持つ武装。

・**神州**:極東のかつての呼び方。

・**神道**:極東の教譜。極東の神々を信奏し、神奏術を用いる。

・**聖術**:Tsirhc系の術式。旧派は聖譜や聖者関係、改派は聖譜のみから力を導く。

・**生徒会**:各教導院の内務、外務などを行う組織。

・**聖譜**:前地球時代の歴史を記した歴史書。七組+抄本がある。

・**聖譜記述**:聖譜の機能により、前地球時代の歴史が百年先まで自動更新される。が、一六四八年の記述を最後に更新が停止している。

・**聖連**:聖譜連盟。歴史再現を主導するための組織。

・**奏者**:各教譜の信徒。

・**総長連合**:総長を長に、各教導院の警備など、実働と指揮を行う組織。

・**卒業**:極東以外の国は無期限制。極東は十八歳卒業制。

た行

・**代演**:術式発動に拝気を使用する代わりに、神の喜ぶものを奉納すること。

・**地脈**:空間を構成する流体の流れる経路の内、太いもの。

・**Tsirhc**:神の子を長に据えた教譜。聖譜を信奏する。

・**Tes.【テス/テスタメント】**:“応答”“了解”の意。

・**三征西班牙【トレスエスパニア】**:大内、大友家+スペインのこと。ポルトガルも併合中。

あ行

・**出雲産業座(IZUMO)**:極東最大規模の企業座。極東の神社の総本山で武蔵の建造を担った企業。

・**六護式仏蘭西【エグザゴンフランセーズ】**:毛利家+フランスのこと。

・**ATELL**:流体の最小単位。術式に使用する。

・**英国**:イングランド。浮遊島を用いており、極東の土地や大名を支配していない。

・**M.H.R.R.**:羽柴家+神聖ローマ帝国のこと。

か行

・**外燃拝気**:自分の外に蓄積された拝気のこと。流体燃料などが該当。

・**旧派【カトリック】**:古くから存在するTsirhcの主流。

・**教導院**:学校施設のこと。実質上の政軍中心部。分校が多く存在する。

・**教譜**:神や聖譜を信奏する組織。集団。

・**極東**:重奏統合騒乱の後、神州をこう呼ぶ。

・**K.P.A.Italia【ケーピーエーイタリア】**:安芸諸国連合+イタリア都市連合のこと。

・**賢鉱石、賢水**:流体を含んだ鉱石、水。流体燃料としても使用可能。

・**校則法**:聖連が取り決めた教導院間の基本法。

さ行

・**Jud.【ジャッジ/ジャッジメント】**:咎人用の“応答”“了解”の意。

・**重奏世界**:かつて神州のコピーを置いた異空間のこと。地脈制御で保たれていた。

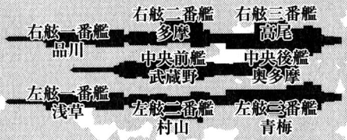
・**重奏統合争乱**:重奏世界が崩壊した際に生じた重奏世界側住人と現実世界側(神州)住人の戦争。重奏世界側が勝利して神州は暫定支配を受ける。

・**重奏領域**:落ちてきた重奏世界の神州が、砕けながら現実側に合一した箇所。

words

words

・**武蔵**:航空都市艦。極東に許された唯一の独立領土。



・**武蔵アリアダスト学院**:武蔵上、奥多摩に存在する極東の代表校。

・**矛盾許容**:この世界の基礎能。あらゆる物理法則の同時存在を叶える。

・**ムラサイ**:Tsirhcとは別に聖譜を信奏する後発派。

ら行

・**流体**:矛盾許容型の空間構成要素。

・**流体燃料**:燃料として精製された流体。外燃拝気や、流体駆動器に用いられる。

・**流体駆動器**:流体の空間変異力を用いた駆動器。効果は内部の紋章などによって変化する。

・**流体炉**:空間から流体を抽出精製する炉。地脈炉より出力は低いが比較的安全。

・**歴史再現**:聖譜記述を人々が再現して世界の流れを保つこと。

な行

・**内燃拝気**:自分の中にため込んだ拝気のこと。

は行

・**拝気**:人間が一時間存在するために必要な流体。3600ATELL。術式の消費ATELL換算単位。

・**P.A.ODA【ピーエーオダ】**:織田家+オスマン。

・**表示枠**:各教譜の基本加護を使用するための術式デバイス。

・**改派【プロテスタント】**:旧派腐敗からの脱却と時代に合わせたTsirhcの新流。

・**武神**:人が同化して動く巨大な人型機械。

・**奉納**:神に、神の喜ぶものや内燃拝気を納めること。献納。

ま行

・**走狗【マウス】**:神道教譜と奏者の仲介をする霊獣型デバイス。他教譜では走徒とも言う。

・**魔術**:欧州で絶賛迫害中の民間術式。

・**末世**:この世の終わり。聖譜の歴史記述が途切れる一六四八年のこと。

・**帝**:神格者、京にて神器による地脈制御を行っているとされる。俗世に関与しない。

・**三河**:元信公の地脈炉暴走崩壊で消滅。

●この頃の浅間の予定●

「姉ちゃん！　姉ちゃん！　ちょっとピンチ状況じゃね!?　大丈夫!?」

「フフフ、心配するのよ愚弟！　そしたらいいとこ見せて逆転してあげるわ？
あ、でも、今日の夕食は一人で食べるのよ？　寂しかったら友人と騒いでらっしゃい？　いい？」

Index

- A — B — C — D — E — F — G — H — I
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- Asama's Plans

A ↑

- Academy: An educational facility. Used as the center of political and military power. Tend to have many branch schools.
- Academy Rules: The basic laws upheld between academies. Agreed to by the Testament Union.
- Apocalypse: The end of the world. 1648 when the Testament's history descriptions end.
- ATELL: The smallest unit of ether. Used for spells.

B ↑

- Blessings: The amount of ether needed for a human to exist for one hour. 3600 ATELL. Conversion unit for a spell's ATELL consumption.

C ↑

- Catholic: The old mainstream version of Tsirhc.
- Chancellor's Officers: An organization led by the chancellor which leads the academy and performs work such as defense.
- Contradiction Allowance: The foundational ability of the world. Allows the simultaneous existence of all sorts of physical laws.

D ↑

- Divine States: Former name of the Far East.
- Divine Weapon: A weapon that, unlike a normal weapon, has a unique ability.

E ↑

- Emperor: A divine individual who is said to control the ley lines using the Imperial Regalia in Kyou. Does not interfere with the world.
- England: Uses a floating island and does not control any Far Eastern land or Far Eastern daimyo.
- Ether: Component that makes up contradiction-allowing space.
- Ether Engine: An engine that uses ether's space-altering ability. The effect changes based on the internal crest.
- Ether Fuel: Ether that has been purified into fuel. Used as External Blessings or for ether engines.
- Ether Reactor: A reactor that extracts and purifies ether from the air. Has a lower output than a ley line reactor, but is relatively safe.
- External Blessings: Blessings accumulated outside of oneself. Ether fuel is an example.

F ↑

- Far East: Name of the Divine States after the Harmonic Unification War.

G ↑

- God of War: A giant humanoid machine that people combine with to move.
- Graduation: No limit for nations other than the Far East. Far Easterners must graduate at 18.

H ↑

- Harmonic Territory: Locations where the fallen Harmonic World Divine States unified with the real world while breaking apart.
- Harmonic Unification War: A war between the harmonic world residents and the real world (Divine States) residents after the destruction of the harmonic world. The harmonic world residents won and began a provisional rule over the Divine States.
- Harmonic World: A former alternate space that copied the Divine States. Preserved through ley line control.
- Hexagone Française: Mouri clan + France.
- History Recreation: Recreating the Testament descriptions to maintain the path the world takes.

I ↑

- Inherited Name: The name of a historical figure given to an appropriate individual for the history recreation.
- Internal Blessings: blessings stored within oneself.
- IZUMO: The Far East’s largest corporation. The headquarters for Far Eastern shrines and the corporation that built the Musashi.

J ↑

- Judge/Judgment: Means “understood”. Used by criminals.

K ↑

- K.P.A. Italia: Association of Aki States + Union of Italian City States.

L ↑

- Ley Line: The thicker of the pathways through which ether flows.

M ↑

- Magic: Folk spells currently under persecution in Europe.
- M.H.R.R.: Hashiba clan + Holy Roman Empires.
- Mikawa: Destroyed by the collapse of Lord Motonobu’s ley line reactor.
- Mlasi: A later non-Tsirhc religion that also worships the Testament.
- Mouse: A spirit beast device to act as an intermediary between the Shinto religion and its musicians. Other religions use different names.
- Musashi: Aerial city ship. The sole independent territory allowed for the Far East.

[First Starboard Ship – Shinagawa/Second Starboard Ship – Tama/Third Starboard Ship – Takao/First Central Ship – Musashino/Back Central Ship – Okutama/First Port Ship – Asakusa/Second Port Ship – Murayama/Third Port Ship – Oume]

- Musashi Ariadust Academy: The Far East’s representative academy which exists on Okutama of Musashi.
- Musician: A religion’s worshiper.

O ↑

- Offering: Providing a god with something they will enjoy or Internal Blessings.
- Orei Metallo/Nero: Ore or water containing ether. Can be used as ether fuel.

P ↑

- P.A. Oda: Oda clan + Ottomans.
- Protestant: A new style of Tsirhc created to escape the corruption of Catholicism and to adjust to the new age.

R ↑

- Religion: Organizations or groups that worship a god or the Testament.

S ↑

- Shinto: Far Eastern religion. Worships the Far Eastern gods and uses divine music spells.
- Shirasago Enterprises: IZUMO’s shrine brand.
- Sign Frame: Spell device needed to use each religion’s basic protection.
- Spell: Causing a miracle in a certain space by processing ether.
- Student Council: The organization that handles an academy’s domestic and foreign affairs.
- Substitution: Offering something to please a god instead of using Blessings to activate a spell.

T ↑

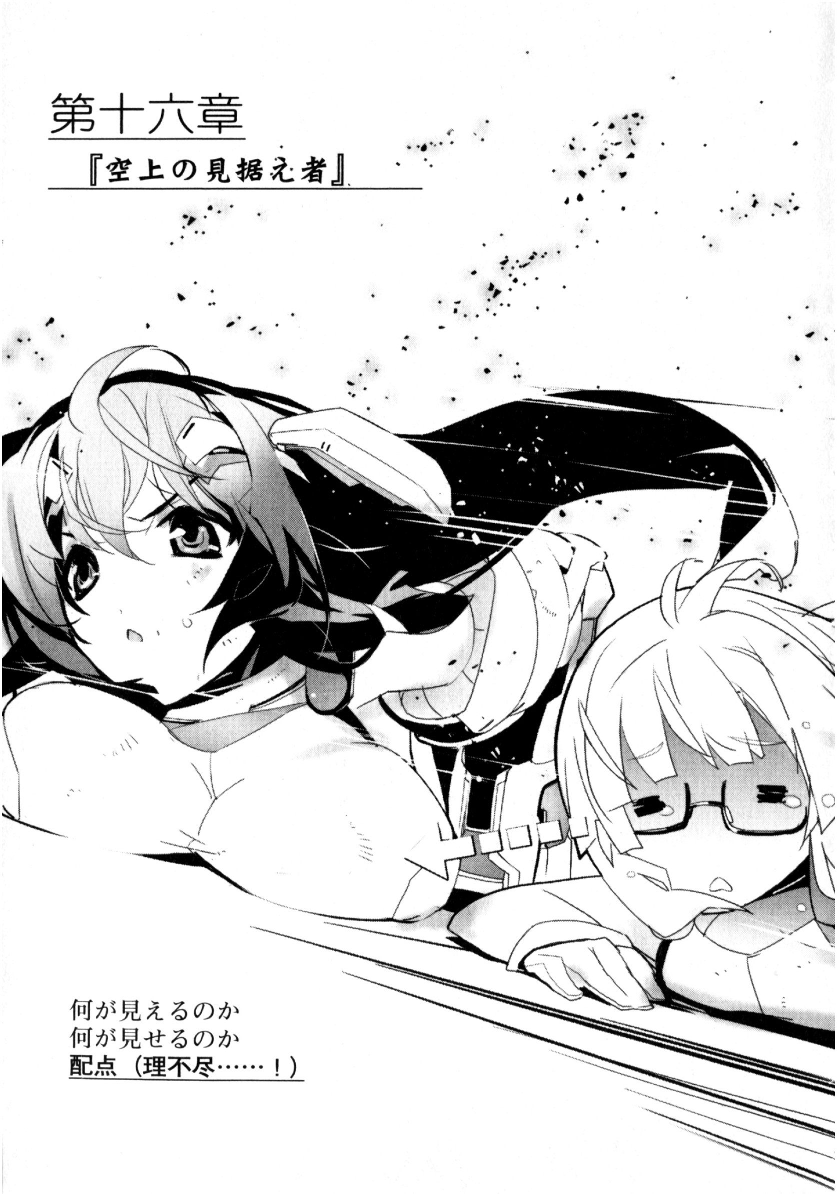
- Tes/Testament: Means “understood”.
- Testament: A history book that provides the history of the earth’s previous age. There are seven pairs and excerpts.
- Testament Descriptions: History of the earth’s previous age that is automatically updated by the Testament. However, it stopped updating after the description for 1648.
- Testament Union: An organization meant to lead the history recreation.
- Tres España: Oouchi and Ootomo clans + Spain. Currently includes Portugal.
- Tsirhc: A religion which places the Son of God at the top. Worships the Testament.

Asama’s Plans ↑

Toori: Sis! Sis! Aren’t you in a fair bit of trouble!? Are you okay!?

Kimi: Heh heh heh. Worry about us, foolish brother! And then we’ll show you a magnificent comeback. Oh, but eat dinner on your own today. If you’re feeling lonely, you can go have some fun with a friend. Okay?

Chapter 16: Viewer in the Sky


第十六章
『空上の見据え者』
何が見えるのか
何が見せるのか
配点（理不尽……！）

What can you see?

What can you show?

Point Allocation (Unfair…!)

A battle had begun.

Their enemy was the two Hidden Dragons that had appeared on the aerial ship's deck. But then something flew in toward those dragons: an interruption, a resumption, and a series of collisions and separations in the time between evening and night.

On the investigation ship's deck, Asama found the massive noise sounded a lot like blades slicing through the air.

…It can't be.

"The Non-Dragon Sword!?"

The reverberation and windy form were more of an answer than her voice.

On the port side of the bow, a giant form was using its entire body to slash at and push back the Hidden Dragons that faced Asama and the others. It was a made of bluish-white blades and it looked a lot like the Non-God Sword they had fought the day before, but…

…It's different.

The ether light emitted from it had a calm color.

Ether light was bluish-white when stable, but it grew yellow and then red when it became accelerated or overheated.

Yesterday's Non-God Sword had been yellow, so it must have been fairly overheated as a stagnation.

This Non-Dragon Sword was different. It had a calm color, so…

"Is it something like my Cerberus?" asked Mitotsudaira.

"No, it isn't," answered Asama. She paused for a "you see". "Yesterday's Non-God Sword was a stagnation that used a local god's mold to appear, but today's Non-Dragon Sword – most likely, anyway – is a local god appearing using the Non-God Sword's sword mold. Your Cerberus seems similar, Mito, but that's because a stagnation took on the form of a weaker local god when it was gathered for tuning. So to be strictly accurate-…"

"To be strictly accurate, we're in the middle of battle!!"

Just as Mitotsudaira shouted at her, Asama was pushed to the deck from behind.

It was Adele. She had wrapped her arms around Asama and knocked her over. The reason why soon followed.

It was a dragon cannon.

The Hidden Dragon that passed by to the starboard side of the stern had turned back toward them and attacked.

It was more of a diagonal line than a horizontal sweep.

Hearing a scorching sound brushing across her back and hair, Asama quickly lay face down on the deck with Adele.

Adele noticed a difference in height between her and Asama.

When she lay face down, she was much lower. She was low altitude.

When Asama lay face down, she was much higher. She was high altitude.

Since they were trying to avoid getting hit, Adele had a definite advantage. *All right!* she thought, but…

…*Wait, does that make me a really selfish person?*

When she thought about it, she realized Asama had lived a life poorly suited for battle due to no fault of her own. To celebrate that fact meant she was a failure to her combat style of vassal. Her proper role was to assist Asama, so…

“Don’t worry, Asama-san! I’ll lie down enough for the both of us!”

“Did you hit your head, Adele?”

Asama released the guard parts on the sides of her breasts, lowering her body. Kimi ran over after evacuating to the starboard side. She too lay down next to Adele.

She placed a hand next to her mouth and whispered so only Adele could hear.

“Adele. Did you know that anyone who gropes Asama’s boobs is blessed with bigger ones herself?”

“Eh?”

That’s not true is it? she thought, but it might be true.

…Umm.

If groping them really will make mine bigger, then it’s worthwhile. And even if it isn’t true, it’s not like I lose anything.

If groping them won’t make mine any smaller, isn’t it worth a try? And the dragon cannon is zwooshing by overhead right now, so couldn’t I cop a quick feel and pass it off as an accident? Or would that not work?

Adele thought. She thought long and hard.

“Um, Asama-san.”

She decided to ask about it, so Adele made up her mind and…

“Do your boo-”

“Here it comes, Adele! Kimi!”

Heat swept by overhead.

Adele screamed and quickly pressed against the deck, but then she realized she would definitely be fine if Asama had not been hit.

I guess Asama-san has her troubles too… she thought.

…And why am I feeling so sad now?

Yes.

Asama was someone who had ended up with a large hitbox due to no fault of her own.

In terms of Ultimate Savage Historical Reign, a fighting game that was popular on the divine network lately, she was like Kanou Eitoku who could be hit by the mid-height ink attack even when crouching. That was a mistake on the developers’ part, but since blocking against that provided the perfect chance to use the Screw Folding Screen Drop, it actually made him a decent character.

Meanwhile, Adele had ended up with small boo-…had ended up a very flat sort of person, so she was more like the player's ship in a bullet hell game.

She could not say that either was superior, but couldn't she just accept that she had evolved to give her an advantage in battle?

No, she could not. So…

"Um, Asama-san, this is a little hard to say, but could I get a quick feel of your boo-"

"It's coming from the other direction now, Adele! Kimi!"

She got down again.

Stop doing that, she told herself. After all, the Hidden Dragon probably could not move its head enough to directly hit her while she lay down. That Asama and Kimi were unharmed was proof of that. So instead of pressing against the deck, she could relax and ask Asama her question.

And she did.

"Um, Asama-san, could I try feeling your boo-"

"It's charging this way!! Adele, Kimi!"

"Wah!" shouted Adele as she scrambled to her feet.

Kimi slapped the girl's butt as she did, so she looked back, worried that Kimi would not be able to escape. But when she saw Kimi lifting up her own breasts with the Hidden Dragon charging in behind her, she was reminded yet again how much of a crazy person that girl was.

Adele averted her gaze and decided to run away without her, but then…

"Adele!"

"Wh-what!?"

"Did you actually believe that?"

Adele dashed to safety.

Mitotsudaira saw the Hidden Dragons helping each other.

The one on the port side of the bow had been attacked by the Non-Dragon Sword, so it had lost its front right leg and was at a serious disadvantage.

That may have been why the one that had run to the starboard side of the stern launched a second dragon cannon at the Non-Dragon Sword and charged toward it.

…But the previous dragon cannon didn't do anything to the Non-Dragon Sword!

The blades making up the Non-Dragon Sword's body were made from a sword mold. The dragon cannon would be made of light or heat, but the Non-Dragon Sword could absorb those things as a part of its swords and thus break apart and weaken the attack. The second dragon cannon destroyed a few of the Non-Dragon Sword's wings, but it was erased as it reflected wildly and dispersed.

The Hidden Dragon must have decided a long-range attack was not going to work, so it kept low to the deck and used the wings on its back to make a high-speed charge toward the Non-Dragon Sword.

…It really is fast!

And right along the Hidden Dragon's path was Asama with Adele tugging at her hand and Kimi with Asama tugging at her hand.

…They really are slow!

2/3 of Asama and all of Kimi behind her were clearly not going to get out of the way in time. And yet the idiot sister was wiggling her body.

"O-oh, Asama! You get so forceful at night!"

"The Hidden Dragon is coming!!"

Yep. It's kind of right there, thought Mitotsudaira while somehow not at all surprised. But…

"_______________"

The Hidden Dragon passed through where Asama and Kimi were.

“Okutama” watched it all play out.

The Hidden Dragon had definitely passed through where Asama and Kimi were.

Her thought circuits performed a battle simulation assuming Kimi had died and estimated what other losses that would lead to and what would happen after the battle. But…

…*Eh?*

“Okutama” continued to watch it all play out.

Right next to the passing Hidden Dragon, Kimi was spinning around with Asama in her arms.

There was no point in asking what had happened.

It was a spell.

Kimi tended to use evasion and defense spells that would take charge of her location and prevent anyone from interfering with her dance. So…

…*Is the previous spell still in effect?*

This was the interlude or the MCing between songs.

Kimi calmly spun Asama around but then gently lowered her to the deck. And then she narrowed her eyes.

“The performance is still underway, you foolish lot. In fact, it hasn’t even begun. After all…”

She raised her left hand with the Hidden Dragon charging toward the Non-Dragon Sword behind her.

A moment later, her briefly wavering hand shot upwards and the dancer spoke.

“I…”

Just as her hand rose, a great light flew through the sky.

“I have yet to sing.”

It was the Non-Dragon Sword. That dragon made of swords quickly flew high into the sky.

"————!!"

It avoided the Hidden Dragon's charge by flying.

And the racing Hidden Dragon ended up crashing into the injured Hidden Dragon.

A deafening noise brought destruction and movement.

It was a one-sided collision between Hidden Dragons. The great unharmed mass slammed into the injured one at high speed.

The one with the missing leg could not hold its ground and was sent flying and its side struck what was behind it: a half-torii jib crane on the bow of the investigation ship. There was one on the port and one on the starboard which formed a full torii shape together, but the one was broken off halfway up when the giant body struck it.

"…!"

The half still connected to the deck tore into the dragon with the sharp edge of the break.

It sounded a lot like tearing paper. The Hidden Dragon's left side split wide open along a diagonal line and fragments of light spilled forth like scattering cloth.

What might have been a scream or a cry of anger split the night sky.

Meanwhile, the other Hidden Dragon tried to come to a quick stop. But due to the impact and its previous momentum, it could not stop right away and could not turn around.

"You are mine."

A light arrived.

A spear raced past the stopping Hidden Dragon.

This was the attack that had dealt with the initial Hidden Dragon.

It flew in once more and hit the Hidden Dragon injured from the Non-Dragon Sword’s attack.

“That’s one!” shouted the silver wolf as the Hidden Dragon tore apart.

Its giant red body split open like a flower and the bands of light that spread out were like yellow flower petals.

Those petals scattered.

By that time, the other one had managed to stop and turn around. Its hips rose up and spun around, its tail stood tall, and it faced its target like a cat ready to pounce, but that target was not a person.

It was sound and movement.

The sound was a voice.

The movement was a dance.

The dancer stood in the center of the deck and moved her entire body.

“――――――――”

She danced.

Her dance remade the stage.

Defense spell sign frames had been placed on the Hidden Dragon. The fighters also had defense and divine protections cast on them. The ones that the shrine maiden had left in the dancer’s care came back to life when the dance resumed.

“――――”

They all caught their breath and prepared to fight.

But that was not all that happened.

There was an additional voice. The captain automaton called out to them while producing a ship’s wheel sign frame for herself.

“I will tilt the ship! Prepare yourselves, everyone! Over.”

Asama watched Kimi singing and dancing.

“____________”

“Okutama” turned the ship’s wheel while showing no fear of the Hidden Dragon. She pulled the side stick at the bottom of the sign frame first, so she was turning the ship on its roll axis instead of the usual yaw axis.

…*She’s tilting the ship!*

Compared to the bow, the starboard side moved down and the port side moved up for a clockwise rotation.

It was enough of a tilt that Asama and the others had to bend their left knee. At this angle, they would be fine as long as they did not move down the slope to the right.

“____________”

They could place the entire soles of their feet against the deck and the hardened wood material was rough enough to provide decent friction.

But, thought Asama. *The Hidden Dragon won’t be so lucky.*

…*This will work!*

It was like comparing an ant to a human. They could easily handle this slope with their small size, but that giant dragon could not. To the Hidden Dragon, the deck of the 100 meter investigation ship would be shaky ground and the deck would seem polished and smooth.

It was an unsteady place. Sure enough, the Hidden Dragon tilted its body and braced its legs against the starboard side.

…*How about that!?*

It slipped. It just barely managed to stop itself with its claws, but…

“…!”

It roared and Asama noticed a hint of humiliation in it.

With its footing taken away, it could not fire its dragon cannon or explosive pressure roar like it wanted. Even flight required solid enough footing for a jump that gave it some initial speed.

…Now that it can't do any of that, it can't move.

A divine transmission came in from Naruze.

"Maybe I should anthropomorphize it…and genderbend us. No, maybe it's better to leave things as is…"

Asama knew better than to ask what that girl was thinking. Next to her, Adele simply hung her head.

But this strategy to seal away the Hidden Dragon's mobility had likely been "Okutama's" idea.

Unlike the girls, she had knowledge of battles against dragons, so she would know what was best and could pull it off in battle.

After the Non-Dragon Sword had dodged the Hidden Dragon's charge and had it collide with its companion, the automaton had taken advantage of the Hidden Dragon's confusion.

It was now Asama and the others' turn to defeat the Hidden Dragon. So…

"————"

Asama looked up into the sky.

She saw the Non-Dragon Sword in the dark heavens. It was rising and seemed unsure whether or not it should return here, but…

"————"

Asama heard a smaller cry from somewhere.

It was Mitotsudaira's Cerberus. Its triple roar was not very loud, but it seemed to reach the sky.

"…!"

Asama heard the Non-Dragon Sword roaring back.

There was a tremor in it, but it was a definite reply.

…Could it be?

Asama had a thought.

She was linking together a few of her suspicions.

…Could this stagnation incident be connected to the Apocalypse's mysterious phenomena!?

The Non-Dragon Sword looked back at them from the sky.

It looked first at Mitotsudaira, then at Kimi, and…

…It's looking at me!?

It clearly turned its gaze toward them.

"__________"

And then at the Musashi.

The giant ship was hidden in what looked like empty air, but could that ether-born dragon see it?

It released a loud roar that was different from those used to attack.

"…!!"

And it flew high into the sky. Ether light wrapped around it as it flew away.

It left.

But they did not have time to watch it go. There was one thing they still had to do.

"We must defeat the Hidden Dragon," said Asama as the Asama Shrine's representative.

"Okutama" responded with a nod while further tilting the ship.

"Judge. I have determined that is an excellent decision, Asama-sama. Now is your chance. Over."

That was true. Adele opened a shield and nodded next to her, but…

"Um, 'Okutama'-san?"

“What is it? Over.”

“Judge.” Adele nodded and then lightly kicked at the deck with her left heel. “Well, um, how far are you going to tilt this? We’re about at our limit too.”

“That is an excellent question. Over.”

“No, not over.”

Adele refused to back down and Asama sensed danger in this conversation. So Asama asked “Okutama” another question while telling herself to remain calm and not to be surprised no matter what might happen.

“Umm… ‘Okutama’-san?” she asked. “Surely the dragon attack hasn’t caused some kind of malfunction in the ship, right? And surely that doesn’t mean you can’t stop it from tilting now that it’s started, right?”

“Okutama” looked her smiling question straight in the eye and slowly nodded.

“That is an excellent question. Over.”

“You mean that is what happened!? You do, don’t you!?”

She could not afford to waste time waiting for an answer, so Asama pointed at the Hidden Dragon as it tilted back as far as it could and dug its claws into the deck.

“Adele, start by taking care of that!”

“Judge!”

The vassal sprinted forward with shield in hand.

Adele ran across the deck as it tilted to the right.

Her training at the 2nd schoolyard had of course only been with a horizontal surface. This was her first time fighting under these conditions. But…

“I’ll show you what it means to grow up on the Musashi!”

She continued along the diagonal deck.

She leaned forward and dashed using the acceleration spell provided by Asama.

"…!"

She ran.

"______________"

Kimi watched Adele run.

The deck was tilting further, but the nimble vassal did not mind. Her speedy run showed no sign of slowing. *Of course it doesn't,* thought Kimi. *Every Musashi resident knows how to do this.*

…We use the towing belts and transport ships on a daily basis, so we're used to unsteady footing.

She had likely decided that layering four shields and striking the Hidden Dragon's pivot leg would knock it off balance.

Kimi watched Adele race forward with her quick but long strides.

"______________"

And something occurred to Kimi.

…This situation might come in handy in-…

She stopped.

There was more to that thought, but she stopped herself. It would introduce an impurity to her song and, more importantly, it would place a weight on her thoughts. So…

"______________"

She focused. She concentrated. She kept her thoughts clear and grasped the state of the stage.

That was when she detected some movement beyond Adele's back.

It was the Hidden Dragon. It was supposedly trapped in place as it tried to brace itself with its legs, but it had moved. Kimi saw the defense spell sign frame cast on the front of its face. It was slowly turning from the port side and toward Adele.

It was obvious what it was trying to do. It was the same thing Kimi was doing.

She took a step.

As she hopped to the right, she spun in the air and faced a different direction upon landing.

The Hidden Dragon was attempting the same thing.

To support its slipping body as much as possible, it was turning its face toward the lowering starboard side.

…And then it will fire.

It hoped to use the recoil to push itself up as much as possible. Depending on the situation, it might even be using that to take flight.

But it was also matching that blast to the enemy's approach. Adele was the one who had created the opportunity to break and drive back the dragon that could be seen as this one's "parent", so it was trying to fight back.

"Adele!"

Asama sensed what was happening and cried out.

"You're going to get roasted with a 'showaaa'!"

Kimi used her rotating step to smack Asama on the back of the head. "Ow," said Asama as she turned around, but Kimi had already used the hit to rotate away in the opposite direction.

"You don't often take the tsukkomi role, Kimi," said Asama while holding her head.

I shouldn't have done something so boring, she thought just as light raced out toward Adele.

…Oh?

Kimi thought as she spun around.

…That really is a "showaaa" sound.

Adele was entirely focused on running.

She needed to use this time to reach their opponent.

She hurried. This was a 100 meter deck and their opponent was over 30 meters long.

She did not have to go far and it would not take long to reach it.

But a counterattack arrived before she could get there. It was a dragon cannon. And it probably doubled as a way to stop the dragon from slipping down the deck.

…Oh, so it's trying to erase me as an afterthought.

But Adele trusted her heart.

It told her to focus on running.

They had a strategy, she had friends she could trust, and her role here was the 1st step in their strategy.

That meant she had to run now, so even though the dragon cannon swept along the deck from the left…

"Showaaa!!"

Adele shouted as she ran.

It's going to hit! yelled some part of Adele's mind.

She did not know if that was the cowardly part or the anxious part, but she trusted in her feet as they pounded on the deck.

As long as they held to the solid deck and continued forward, she had not been hit.

She could decide she had been hit once she could no longer run. So…

"…!"

Adele ran and stretched forward.

She moved forward as if to push away the approaching light.

One layer of her shield shattered as the dragon cannon approached.

But, thought Adele. *I'm still running, so it didn't actually hit me.* So…

…*Yes.*

The part of her mind saying it was going to hit was still there.

That cowardly or anxious part of her would not go away, but she instead shouted to the part of herself that trusted in the fact that she was still running.

Go!

And then the cowardice and anxiety gave up.

Telling her it would hit did not stop her or slow her, so going for it was the only option now.

"Judge!!"

She focused on running.

The vassal sped up and she moved in an even straighter line.

The Hidden Dragon immediately realized what she was trying to do and got up.

It knew its enemy was trying to strike its front left leg with her shield.

Its front left leg was on the downward slope, so it and the back left leg supported its entire body. But the bottom of the foot was slipping and the claws were straining. A hit now would be dangerous.

The back leg would probably hold. Its claws were much stronger than those on the front legs.

But the front leg was in trouble. A dragon's front legs were not made all that large in the first place.

Plus, its front legs were already pushed up from the deck by the dragon cannon meant to correct its position.

An attack there would be dangerous.

So the Hidden Dragon swung its body while launching its dragon cannon.

Before the vassal could reach it…

“_____________”

It lifted its front left side to avoid the vassal’s attack.

“Okutama” silently commented on the dragon’s action.

…How reckless.

It was releasing its dragon cannon to recover from losing its balance.

But it had just adjusted its position in advance, using the initial speed of the dragon cannon.

It had lifted up the front left leg the vassal was headed toward. It almost looked like an animal rising up a bit to threaten an opponent.

The vassal had been dodged.

The dragon continued by swinging its dragon cannon down between its front legs and below its body.

It intended to roast the vassal from behind.

This is not going well, determined “Okutama”. *At this rate, Adele-sama will be showaaa’d beyond repair. My fellow automatons who monitor her daily life are sure to criticize me. I must visually record her final moments so they know it was not my fault.*

But…

“…Huh? Over.”

“Okutama” saw something strange.

The Hidden Dragon tripped.

And not from the front left leg Adele had been targeting. The front right leg at the top of the slope had been blasted outwards.

"————!"

The dragon cannon was blown off course and struck the dragon's own left leg as it collapsed.

It collapsed to the right.

…What is this?

What had knocked the Hidden Dragon's front right leg out from under it?

She had seen something there: a small and dull reflection of light. In fact, she had seen several.

"Coins!?"

They were 10 yen coins. In an explosive blast, they scattered into the sky like a fountain. "Okutama" calculated that it was a sum total of 1000 yen. And using coins as weapons was traditional for merchants and Technohexen. As could be seen in fortunetelling cards, Technohexen had long been associated with medallions.

…So who was it that fired a roll of coins just now!?

There was only one possibility: the person in the sky below the starboard side.

"Naito-sama!"

Naito held her broom in sniper mode in the gloomy sky.

…I can't believe this.

She had used two acceleration spells for her sniper shot: One on the back of the broom and one on the front. She had also been given accuracy by…

"Ga-chan, thanks for the guide line."

"You don't need to thank me when it was necessary."

Naruze added a “but” while supporting herself in midair by placing her arms around Naito’s waist from the left. She watched the straight guide line she had drawn fade from the broom handle.

“Thank you for making a shot that could outdo that dragon, Margot.”

Naito nodded back but said nothing.

The situation was still underway.

They were on the starboard side of the rolling investigation ship and they could see the dragon collapsed on its side on the port side of the bow.

…It only fell over.

They had not shot through it and it had not been broken.

Technohexen used spell-enhanced coins as weapons, so a roll of coins was their strongest attack. Casting a unified control spell on 100 or more coin bullets was not easy, but its power was unfathomable if it succeeded.

When test firing, one of their serial shots had broken through three Pompeii-style concrete walls. The problem was the powerful recoil that prevented them from using it in flight.

…And I even had Ga-chan support me and provide a guide line.

They had sensed that the Hidden Dragon was preparing to take flight. They had wings just like it. With wings of their own, they could recognize the actions taken in preparation to use them, so as soon as it had raised its head to focus on the sky, they had known it would take flight.

If it could not take a running start, it would need to make a jump. And to brace its legs for that jump, it would need to lift its body.

That meant the dragon cannon.

They had known Adele was running in as a distraction, so they had flown to place her between them and the Hidden Dragon.

They had used Adele as a shield and yet waited for the very last moment to fire. With the dragon’s weight focused on the closer left leg, it had been possible even the coin roll shot would not be powerful enough.

And so…

“I really thought we could shoot through the rising right leg.”

Naito thought she had done well as a sniper. When the Hidden Dragon had lifted its left leg, it had created cover for them and a blind spot for the dragon, so she had shot between the left leg and the deck to hit the right leg.

The perfect shot had swept the leg out from under the dragon and tripped it.

It had been a powerful shot from an anti-personnel perspective. A direct hit would have destroyed a mobile shell. But that had not happened here.

…Oh, I get it.

Naito realized why she had felt so little excitement when thinking about the Edel Brocken tester exam.

That’s right.

She trained in the mornings, her friends recognized her skill, and she was near the top even among those at work, but…

…There’s an even higher level.

She had vaguely realized it already.

There was a higher level.

Not just with her friends or on the Musashi.

When looking at the other nations and the world as a whole, there would always be a higher level.

If a Technohexen could not shoot through a dragon that appeared near the Musashi, could she really be satisfied with being at the upper level of her friends?

“————”

Of course, she also had to ask what was necessary and what was adequate. She did not know if this "higher level" she was seeing was really necessary for her. But…

…*It's not just that there is a higher level.*

There was *always* a higher level.

If she never looked up and remained where she was within Musashi and among her friends, she would be safe. After all, she could still look down without looking up. And they were already in a position where there was plenty below them.

So couldn't she decide to just stay here?

Any higher and the differences between levels grew much more clear. If she lost, she would drop all the way down.

And in about 2 more years, she would no longer be a student. She could spend that time at a useful position that was appropriate for her age.

"Ga-chan."

So couldn't she remain carefree, graduate, and live on as a delivery Technohexen?

Naito had that sudden thought, but…

"Margot!"

She heard her partner's voice.

"Let's go help finish it off!"

The Hidden Dragon looked to its enemies.

The one small girl had passed below its legs and the two Technohexen had fired on it from the sky beyond her.

But while lying on its side, it saw the small girl spin her body around. She rotated to turn her spell shield toward the dragon. Was she taking a defensive position because she was worried it would fire a dragon cannon?

No.

The spinning small girl used that rotation to release the shield into the air.

She abandoned it.

What was she trying to do with this rotation that was worth losing the shield protecting her?

“…There it is.”

It was a spear.

Earlier, that spear had pierced the Hidden Dragon that had been this one’s parent. The small girl picked it up. She ran over, snatched it up, and spun around.

“Extra Special Duty Officer!!”

Mitotsudaira used an acceleration spell to run.

She could not yet claim she ran quickly. She was not accustomed to the acceleration spell, so she could barely control the direction in which it supported her speed and there was a great risk of tripping. And at the moment…

…I’m running on the side of the ship!

When she realized the ship was rolling down to the right, she had jumped over to the starboard side of the hull.

That was an absolute blind spot for the Hidden Dragon. And since the ship was tilting, her footing would grow more solid and she could use that rotation to…

“Jump even further!”

She shot toward the coordinates directly above the dragon. As the ship swung around, she stepped onto the port side edge and then leaped over the dragon’s head.

She was launched into the sky by the ship’s great mass.

She could see the entire Hidden Dragon below her and the spear thrown by Adele reached her spread hands.

She grabbed the handle, rotated it around, and threw her entire body through the air.

“Here I go…!”

She filled the spear with a purification spell sent to her by Asama and she threw all her strength straight down.

After shooting in a rapid fire burst of coins, Naruze saw the finishing blow.

It started with Mitotsudaira’s attack from above hitting the dragon she and Naito had knocked over.

The fallen Hidden Dragon’s torso was badly damaged and ruptured, but this accomplished something else as well.

“The Hidden Dragon is pinned to the deck!”

The dragon arched its back as it tore and scattering light spread from its belly to its limbs.

It roared and shook the deck, but Naruze saw something more.

The finishing blow arrived.

It came from next to Kimi who was continuing to sing and dance at the stern.

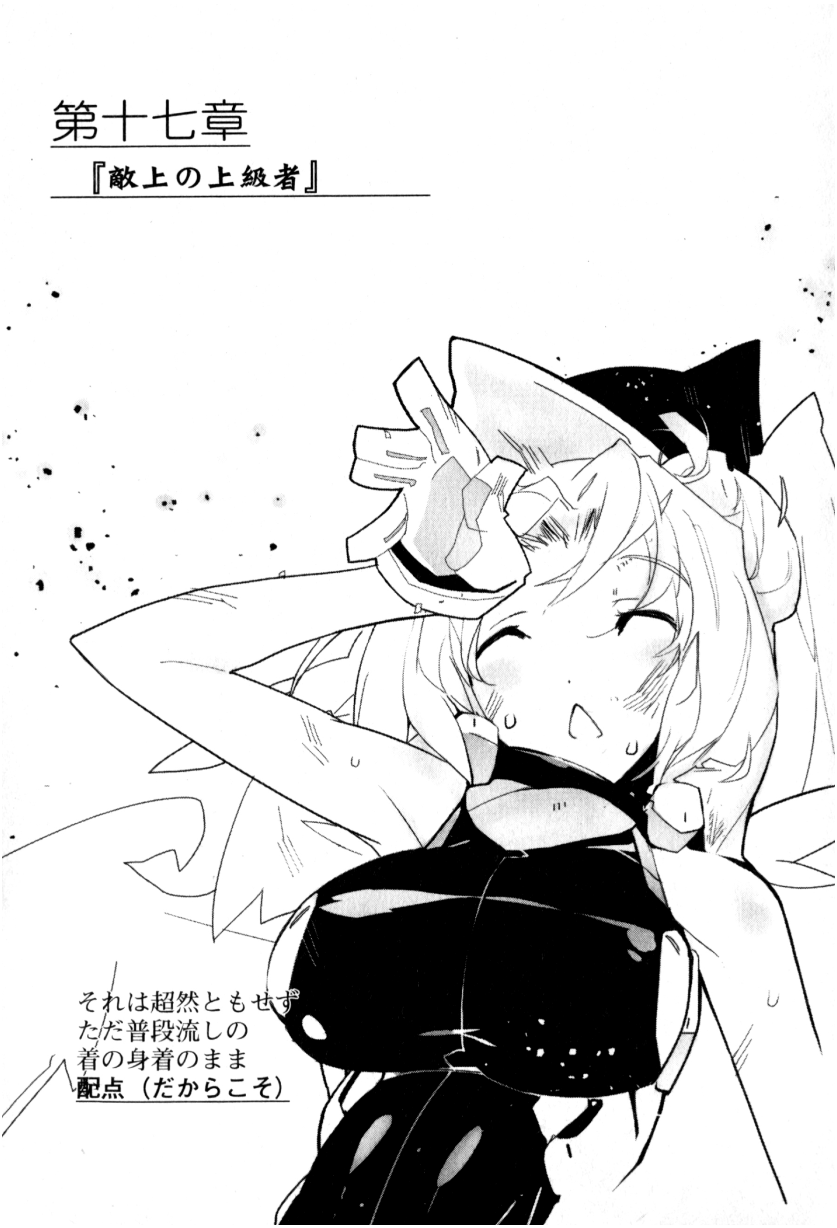
“Asama!”

Asama was holding her bow, Katatsubaki, up toward heaven. And her eyes were staring straight at the Hidden Dragon.

“Hit…!”

A moment of silence pierced the dragon from head to tail.

Chapter 17: Experienced One on the Enemy


第十七章
『敵上の上級者』
それは超然ともせず
ただ普段流しの
着の身着のまま
配点（だからこそ）

It is not aloof

And it happens naturally

In whatever you happen to be wearing

Point Allocation (That Is Why)

We destroyed them, thought Asama.

The second giant Hidden Dragon had just ruptured and vanished thanks to her arrow.

As Mitotsudaira flew through the air, she entered a curving landing trajectory, but there was nowhere for her to land anymore. The ship's roll had increased and the deck was nearly vertical.

But as the silver wolf flew through the emptiness, something caught her: black and gold wings.

Only after being caught on either side by those two did Mitotsudaira seem to realize what the lack of a landing point meant, so she shrunk down in fear. Seeing that, Kimi ended her dance and spoke.

"I like your commitment to the attack."

"I think you can thank our teacher's lessons for that. That's why we were able to work together so well."

They had not planned out Adele's charge, Naito and Naruze's shot, and Mitotsudaira's attack.

They had all cooperated while reading each other's movements. And Mitotsudaira was at the foundation of that.

Her attack had only worked if she trusted the faster Adele to charge in, notice the spear at the bow, and throw it to her.

…Kimi is right. That is a commitment.

That kind of cooperation was only possible when they could picture what the others would do.

But…

…Here it comes.

As soon as Asama thought that, light wrapped around the greatly tilted bow.

It was a series of giant rings forming…

“A tornado. Looks like the Hidden Dragon is recovering again. What do you think about it doing the same thing a third time, Kimi?”

“I think it qualifies as a running gag by that point.”

Asama did not even need to check to see if there was a bitter smile on Kimi’s lips. As the Hidden Dragon went for Round 3, it was a shoulder smaller than the previous 2.

…Does that mean the stagnation is being worn down?

The Hidden Dragon was losing the power of the fragments that scattered into the sky like glowing cloth. But…

“I’ve never heard of a mysterious phenomenon that continually recovers like this.”

“Yes, you have.”

“Eh?”

“Yesterday’s Non-God Sword. After we defeated it, it turned into something else.”

She realized Kimi was right. She had assumed they had not quite defeated it and the transformation was meant as a counterattack, but since this Hidden Dragon was returning in a changed form after being defeated, then that mysterious phenomenon may have been a sign of things to come.

She had records of the previous day’s battle, so…

“I’d like to look back over those once this is over.”

Her vision rotated as she spoke. The investigation ship was tilting and the deck was approaching vertical.

She and Kimi went for an open hatch on the stern of the deck.

Adele went for the hatch on the bow. Mitotsudaira and the 2 Technohexen ascended into the sky and moved around to the new top of the ship. And as the Hidden Dragon tried to recover on the tilting deck…

“____________”

It raised a growling cry, but it was too late.

Before it had even fully formed, it wobbled and lost its grip on the deeply tilted ship.

Its wings had yet to fully form. Nor had the body those wings would move.

So it fell.

Mitotsudaira saw it happen.

She saw the deck grow vertical and the angle of tilt continue beyond even that.

And she saw Asama stand on the wall inside the rear hatch, use the edge of the entrance as cover, and prepare a new arrow.

The Hidden Dragon could not keep a grip with that tilt and it was not fully formed enough to fly, so falling was its only option. If it fell, that giant mass would collide with the ocean far below.

It would shatter without them having to do anything.

But what if?

What if that Hidden Dragon survived? What if it transformed again? What if it self-destructed to take the ship out with it? Musashi’s Shinto Representative could not overlook those “what ifs”.

There was a reason why Asama had to do something now.

…Just like there will be in the future.

It’s called duty, thought Mitotsudaira. She had her own duty as a knight, so she understood just how important that discipline was.

It was in one’s best interests to fulfill their duty and they would be given certain powers to do so.

So Mitotsudaira had a further thought:

…Why did Tomo say she wants to start a band?

Did she want to bring some kind of change or differing viewpoint to her predetermined future?

And just as she began rolling those thoughts around in her head, she heard a voice.

It was Naito who was supporting her on the left side.

“Hmm, yeah. How should I put it?”

…*Eh?*

“There’s just not a good place for her, is there?”

That exasperated comment brought a brief tremble to Naruze on the right. But before Mitotsudaira could decide if she should ask about it, Naito looked up.

“Watch out!!”

Naito sensed the enemy through touch rather than sight or hearing.

Directly above, a chilly wind descended from the heavens which had already made the shift to night.

She was not imagining it. The side effects of a distant movement were reaching her and that unusual movement of air was arriving between the gaps in her feathers. So…

“Here it comes!”

And it did.

The previous parent Hidden Dragon was overhead. After flying away earlier, it must have managed to heal itself to a certain extent. And it seemed to be returning to save the 3rd Hidden Dragon which could be seen as its child.

The parent Hidden Dragon was already performing a power dive. It dropped down as if trying to stomp on the investigation ship that had rolled beyond vertical.

A hit here would probably destroy the ship. Naito could predict it would bend and break it instead of shattering it. After all, this Hidden Dragon was 30 meters long and it had the mass and power that entailed.

If it hit…

…Asama-chi!

Naito saw it.

She could predict the ship would bend and that impact would cause Asama's shot to miss. So she and Naruze had to use the ship's falling time to somehow get the other girls out of the ship.

Or they thought they had to.

"————————!"

A voice shouting "hit" rose into the sky.

Asama fired her raised arrow into the heavens of the night.

Naito saw a single color.

Asama's left eye glowed green as it looked into the night sky.

That was a false eye named Konoha.

She used it to detect and target. Since it already had a targeting torii-style sign frame open, Asama must have predicted this situation. No, to be more accurate…

…She let it happen.

When the 3rd Hidden Dragon had recovered, Asama probably could have fired right away. But she had chosen not to do so and to let the 3rd dragon remain.

"She was waiting for it to call its parent in," said Naruze who seemed to be thinking the same thing.

Since Mitotsudaira nodded between them, their guess was probably accurate.

Asama must have known these mysterious phenomena had a "parent and child" relationship by their very nature, so she used the 3rd one as bait.

"And she fired!"

A straight line of power flew skyward.

The high-powered shot was the same as the one that shattered the transformed Non-God Sword the day before.

…Wow.

This was their classmate, and…

…She can really do it.

This was a strict and diligent classmate who could not sing karaoke properly and had never eaten a crepe, but no Musashi resident would underestimate the Asama Shrine's #2.

Technohexen followed their own rules and gained power from how they separated themselves from others. Similarly, this classmate carried immense duty and followed many rules which made her less "human" but directly brought her power.

Asama was much less like a normal student than the rest of them. She was not a student who was also an Asama Shrine shrine maiden; she was an Asama Shrine shrine maiden who was also a student. But…

"Judge…"

Naito thought to herself.

She had felt there was a good place among everyone for them.

She was currently unsure if she wanted to aim higher or not.

But that was not the issue.

Someone in a higher position already existed alongside them.

The same was true of Mitotsudaira who she currently held with Naruze. Not to mention Kimi and Adele who had helped defeat the Non-God Sword the previous day and were assisting Asama now.

…Yeah.

How was their current position a "good place"? As Technohexen, they could fly, they had the advantage of working as a pair, and they had ways of strengthening themselves. But…

…At best, those things only bring us up to even with the others, don't they?

As soon as she asked herself that, the shot tearing through the sky struck the falling Hidden Dragon.

The power pierced the Hidden Dragon on the bottom of its right side.

The straight line of trailing light punched right through the giant falling body.

But that penetration did more than just open a hole. By targeting it from below, the power passed through the dragon's right side and continued upwards to destroy something else: the sword-textured right wing on its back.

Asama's arrow came out at the base of the wing and collided with the sword-like structure forming its body. The arrow had lost speed while piercing through and it finally detonated at that point.

White light burst, its power passed through the wing, and the arrow purified the entire area.

The white lightning-like light that raced out was a purifying power transmitted through a ley line pathway. When that hit the Hidden Dragon, it was unable to resist the white explosion on its back.

"…!"

The right wing shattered. The base remained and some pieces formed bone, but the pieces that formed feathers became countless shards and their red light blossomed in the night.

But to the Hidden Dragon, this was not the end and it was not forgiven.

A second blow followed.

Without its wing, it stalled out and lost control, so it tumbled through the air.

Its 30-meter body fell through the night and lost its proper positioning. The ferocious wind hit its surviving wing, and…

“————”

While stalling out, it crashed into the upwards-facing side of the investigation ship.

“Okutama” confirmed Asama’s decision.

The investigation ship had been knocked downwards by the Hidden Dragon’s crash.

The fall of that great mass lowered their altitude.

They immediately dropped 15 meters and the wind rose along the surface of the ship like an upside-down waterfall.

They were above the ocean, so the automaton’s sense of smell detected salt in the air, but…

…Asama-sama’s bow and arrow…

Salt was one of the most powerful purification catalysts in Shinto.

And that fact was highlighted by the glow in the wind surrounding Asama as she raised her bow toward heaven again.

She used a spell. Behind her, a dancer stood on the wall and swung her hands about with cloth wrapped around her wrists to represent the wind.

“Is she refining the salt from the sea breeze? Over.”

“Heh heh. Technically, I’m drawing out the purest ether that is most fit for purification.”

The dancer raised both arms to give the cloth “wind” to the shrine maiden.

And as the shrine maiden raised her bow…

“I’ve extracted the pattern. Kimi, distribute it to the others.”

“Okutama” understood what Asama meant. First, the dancer pulled in the wind and extracted ether that was specialized for purification.

…Then Asama-sama analyzes that pattern and creates an instant spell.

From there, Kimi would receive that spell and redistribute it to the others using her song and dance.

They strengthened themselves with an exchange similar to bartering.

…And it's only possible in Shinto which allows substitutions…

And after receiving the "wind", Asama launched a new attack.

But it was not directed at the parent Hidden Dragon that had endured the fall and was now atop the creaking ship's side.

She fired on the 3rd Hidden Dragon falling from the bow of the deck.

She aimed straight at the smaller Hidden Dragon that was nearly thrown off by the ship's fall.

"Hit…!"

She launched the arrow.

The falling Hidden Dragon shattered and blossomed in the night.

There was no scream, just a red light and a bursting noise.

But there was a voice.

It came from the parent Hidden Dragon.

Its giant body had endured the fall and was now standing up on the upward-facing port side of the investigation ship that was slowly rising back up.

"…!!"

It gave a roar of protest and anger.

The dragon's cry shook everything.

The reverberation ignored the color of the night and caused the hull armor of the investigation ship (which they were now using as the floor) to undulate and split.

The peeling armor propagated toward the enemy gunner at the stern, so someone else observed the Hidden Dragon from the unaffected bow.

It was Adele.

She had evacuated to the bow hatch while the parent Hidden Dragon was crashing, but now she was climbing up the rigging and the railing on the edge of the front deck.

“Looks like the tilting of the ship has stopped.”

With that quiet comment, she picked up her vassal’s training spear that was caught on the rigging. Then she looked from the vertical deck to the Hidden Dragon on the top.

“Oh?”

It had turned her way.

And this was no coincidence. It had definitely noticed her and turned to face her. She heard Asama shouting from the stern.

“Adele! Mysterious phenomena are made of ether, so they sense ether more than noise or presences!”

“Eh? What does that mean, Asama?”

“Well.” Asama nodded. “It means it’s hard for them to find you if you tune your ether properly. But we’re in the middle of a battle and everyone’s ether is a little overheated. And, well, you picked up your spear, right? It still has some spell ether left in it, so that clued the Hidden Dragon into your presence there. Heh heh. See, Kimi? It doesn’t matter how big or small your body or boobs are.”

“Please don’t get stuck in exposition mode!”

But the Hidden Dragon was already focused on her.

No, to be more accurate, it was the spear she held that had its attention.

…Oh, so I’m just something extra!

I'm a vassal more worthless than a spear! she added, but that was actually a good thing right now.

“This spear has got to be worth a fair bit of money,” she muttered. “But I'll be leaving this here.”

She stuck the tip of spear through a gap in the railing and raised her right hand toward the dragon.

“Bye then.”

A dragon cannon suddenly flew her way.

While flying with Naito to escape to the front of the ship, Naruze gave a shout while supporting Mitotsudaira with an arm.

“RIP Adele!!!”

“That's being a little inappropriate, isn't it?!”

“No, no,” added in Naito. “It's fine. Look.”

She said it with a tone of exasperated disbelief and she pointed over with her chin.

Adele was sticking her head up from the edge of the deck and her head was woozy from the dragon cannon.

But she was unharmed. The dragon cannon had passed overhead and diagonally into the sky.

“It missed…!?”

The reason why was directly above Adele.

Someone was riding the Hidden Dragon's head.

She had long hair and roughly wore a Far Eastern girl's uniform. She casually rose from her crouched position.

“Chancellor and Student Council President!” shouted Mitotsudaira.

The girl responded while waving from atop the dragon.

“Hi. It's finally my time to shine. I always seem to get the last performance. I like that it helps me stand out, but it can get old. Still.” She smiled. “How about I show off a little.”

Mitotsudaira saw her upperclassmen’s surprise appearance.

Torii stood on the Hidden Dragon’s head and three others stood in front of it: Vice Chancellor Oosuga, Vice President Tadayo, and 1st Special Duty Officer Watanabe.

They must have descended from the Musashi which was in stealth mode overhead. The investigation ship had lowered its altitude, so…

“Yeah, we were having some fun where Suga works part-time, but then we fell off of the Musashi.”

How was it even possible to fall from that atrium park built belowground?

But the current situation was different than with the Non-God Sword the day before.

…*Chancellor and President Torii Mototada is on the front line.*

And before, Vice President Tadayo had only been cleaning up the shattering Non-God Sword, but the current Hidden Dragon had not been shattered yet.

However, Oosuga spoke from right in front of the dragon.

“Hey.” His voice was slow and deep. “Wouldn’t it be sad to hit this thing?”

“See. I don’t really care when I’m up against a human.”

Oosuga did not even put up his guard and Tadayo nodded in response.

“Ho ho.”

She tried to respond with as little emotion as possible, but the Vice Chancellor seemed to think she was urging him on. Oosuga said more to her.

"Hey," he began. "Tadayo, you like animals too, don't you?"

"If they don't have a breath attack, sure."

"You shouldn't discriminate."

"Have you ever owned an animal with a breath attack?"

"You can't expect someone to do that."

"Then what was your point again?"

"Calm down," cut in Watanabe.

She casually spun her metal spear around in her fingers and asked Tadayo a question with a smile.

"Chuu-san[1], you know how much Suga-kun loves cute things, don't you?"

Tadayo responded to Watanabe by pointing her cowling spear at the Hidden Dragon looking their way.

"You think this thing's cute?"

Oosuga nodded.

"Cuter than me anyway."

I can't argue with that… thought Tadayo. *Nothing good ever comes of letting him use his pain-in-the-ass logic.*

But Oosuga then looked up at the Hidden Dragon.

"C'mon, let me see. …You're scared, aren't you?"

A dragon cannon shot his way.

A direct hit led to utter annihilation.

Annihilation of the dragon cannon, that is. The vermilion light scattered into nothingness in front of the 3 on the deck.

It had not been deflected or shattered. It simply vanished into the wind like mist.

"What was that…?" asked Naruze while lowering Mitotsudaira onto the stern.

She did not understand how the dragon cannon had been erased.

Her eyes were focused on Tadayo.

She had raised her spear. It was a plain cowling spear with anti-ether processing done. It was tough, but had nothing more than that. So how had it destroyed the dragon cannon?

"Initial speed and perfect aim," explained Mitotsudaira as she took light steps on the side of the ship to bring strength back to her ankles. "The anti-ether Orei Metallo focused on the tip can 'hit' both dragon cannons and spells. So if she sends the spear in with equal speed to her opponent's attack…"

"They cancel out, don't they? I'm betting she uses a light mobile shell focused on her upper body in order to fix her legs in place and snap her arms forward," said Naito. "That's the defensive sort of attack spell you see in the noncombatant Far East. …A lot of the high level Far Eastern officers use attack methods like this."

"I see." Naruze nodded. "That's a lot like how Mitotsudaira fights. …Keep your legs in place and strike. But you're power and she's speed."

The three girls heard a voice. It was Oosuga's.

"Oh, I hate this," he said. "I always seem to make animals run away from me."

As soon as he said that, the air moved with a dull sound.

The Hidden Dragon's body had suddenly bent like a mountain.

And this was not because it was leaping or jumping back.

It was a physical blow. Oosuga still calmly held his thick wooden sword, but the Hidden Dragon was knocked upwards about 20 meters in front of him.

"Sorry."

As he looked up, the second strike hit.

With a roar, something hit the dragon's back from the opposite side.

A single thought filled Naruze's mind:

…Huh?

She was entirely confused.

A being as giant as a Hidden Dragon was being pummeled instead of shattered.

If this would shatter it, she would understand. An anti-ether attack with a piercing or exploding power would shatter a mysterious phenomenon like a Hidden Dragon. Using only piercing spells would allow you to break through the Hidden Dragon with relatively little power.

Even her and Naito's shots could do that if pressurized far enough.

But Naruze was currently watching physical blows.

These attacks supplied force across a surface.

They would provide an impact, but would not pierce through the enemy's surface. They only pummeled the enemy with the force distributed nearly evenly across the entire surface.

Instead of narrowing down the power, it spread out and did less damage for the amount of power used.

This was a nonlethal technique.

…I suppose it is the kind of technique you would find in the noncombatant Far East…

But the amount of power on display was abnormal.

The strength needed to knock a Hidden Dragon into the sky was enough to throw 10 gods of war to the deck.

Naruze had no idea how he was doing it, but she knew what he was using: that wooden sword and some kind of spell.

Oosuga had used that combination to strike the Hidden Dragon.

And the Hidden Dragon was slammed back down. Its giant body collided with the ship.

"…"

Naruze found herself moving unexpectedly.

She fell onto her butt.

…Eh?

Naruze realized Mitotsudaira was looking at her from the left. Her eyes were widened in surprise. Of course they were. A winged girl had just fallen onto her butt.

Naruze did not feel ashamed. There was a reason she had lost her balance.

"What just happened?"

She could see something in front of her.

It was the Hidden Dragon.

It seemed to be lying on the deck after being knocked down by Oosuga's strike.

"There wasn't an impact?"

It should have crashed into the ship hard enough for the entire ship to bounce, but there was nothing. Naruze had braced herself for the coming tremor, so she had lost her balance and fallen when nothing happened. The Hidden Dragon was the same.

"…!"

It could not understand what had happened. It had probably braced for the fall and impact, but…

…Did something catch it!?

Filling its entire body with strength had created a distortion in its body. When it was caught, the legs braced to land instead created a reactive force.

"————!"

Oosuga's earlier hit must have weakened the bonds holding its body together.

The Hidden Dragon collapsed from the reactive force it created itself.

A roar rang through the sky. The dragon's entire body bent, loosened, unraveled, tore, and scattered.

From tail to head, the dragon's collapse would not stop.

But by then, Naruze had noticed something.

Torii stood on top of the head the Hidden Dragon swung around to protest its collapse.

She was dancing. She swung her arms around, sang something to herself, and occasionally…

"Wa ha."

It looked like her feet were slipping, but she still kept the soles of her feet on the bucking dragon's head and continued to dance.

Naruze realized something when she saw that.

Torii was guiding the collapsing dragon's head.

By stepping down, pulling, and pushing, she turned the vanishing dragon's body and face toward the stern.

And who was waiting behind them there?

"Asama…!"

Asama had climbed up onto the side of the stern.

She had only been able to take her stance and fire without panicking or rushing because of Torii and the others.

…I'm glad I didn't have to hurry this.

By the time she noticed the parent Hidden Dragon flying in, she had received a divine transmission saying the Chancellor's Officers intended to make an appearance. So after her initial attack, she had left the parent dragon to them and instead focused on the smaller one.

Her attack now was not going to steal the credit from Torii and the others. Hidden Dragons were mysterious phenomena, so a purification power was best to supply a finishing blow. Especially with this one that had done the unthinkable and recovered several times in a row.

Torii and the others understood how dangerous this enemy was, so they had guided it toward her for final attack.

And she fired the attack they wanted.

“Hit…!”

She had a clear line between the Hidden Dragon’s forehead and the arrow she held, so all that remained was to release the arrow. She placed plenty of Blessings on this surefire shot. She accelerated and pressurized it. The purification power was sure to shatter the Hidden Dragon’s body and fully erase the remaining stagnation inside it.

Asama performed her follow-through motion while confident it would hit.

And the Hidden Dragon immediately ruptured.

Its head was destroyed with a solid sound.

But it ruptured twice.

Something flew in from the northern mainland sky as a follow-up attack to hers.

…A bullet!?

Asama could tell the projectile that hit the Hidden Dragon as a follow-up attack was a bullet.

As part of her job, she had memorized the flight patterns of various projectiles, so she did not panic.

She watched the dragon as even its roar scattered as wind and thought about whoever had intervened.

…That was a sniper shot.

She generally knew where it had come from. Several transport ships and passenger ships had evacuated and stopped in the mainland sky to avoid the Non-Dragon Sword and Hidden Dragon.

Someone on one of those had fired this sniper shot using a rifle.

Whoever it was had not intended to fire when Asama did. They had most likely watched the Hidden Dragon's movements and determined this was their chance to fire.

It had been an impressive shot.

But there was one thing Asama did not understand.

Why had the sniper shot the Hidden Dragon?

She looked to the passenger ships and transport ships stopped in front of the Musashi in the distant sky. The sniper who had shot the Hidden Dragon was most likely on the three-hull ship in the center.

But…

…Why?

No one could answer that question, but as she wondered about it…

"Maybe they thought they would support us because we were taking too long."

Kimi made a suggestion after climbing up onto the side of the ship behind her, but even she sounded skeptical.

And with no one to answer this question, the light that had been a dragon vanished. But…

…This doesn't resolve everything.

She had realized something during the battle: why these dragons had appeared and that they would not disappear so easily.

I want to go gather my thoughts somewhere, thought Asama before seeing something else.

After jumping down from the scattering Hidden Dragon's head, Torii looked to the northern sky and the ship thought to carry the sniper.

“Was that supposed to be a greeting?”

In the end, the investigation ship could not be righted, so a new transportation ship was sent in for Asama and the others with medical inspection equipment onboard. By then, it was past 7 PM.

It took another hour and a half before they finished their questioning from Asama’s father through a sign frame, provided records of the spells they had used, and finally set foot back on the Musashi’s deck.

And at 9:12 PM, Kimi made a suggestion since they had been given an exception to the curfew.

“My mom’s place is still open this late, so let’s go mooch off of her.”

And so they entered the Blue Thunder for a late dinner.

Chapter 18: Doll Looking Back to a Nostalgic Place

第十八章
『懐かし処の振り向き人形』
あらあら気づけば
巻き込まれてますのよ？
配点（人生トレイン）

Oh, dear. All of a sudden

I'm caught in the middle of this?

Point Allocation (Train of Life)

“Oh, is my foolish brother not here?”

Asama and the others entered the café after Kimi peeked inside.

Asama sat at a table in the back while wondering if Kimi’s swaying hair was naturally so pristine or if it was a spell.

It was a 6-seat table, Kimi sat on the aisle end of the back side, and Adele sat across from her. Kimi liked taking everyone’s orders and Adele had a habit of taking the seat closest to the entrance due to her vassal training.

Asama assumed Naito and Naruze would sit together like always, but…

“Yeah, we feel like eating something, so we’ll sit furthest in.”

They took the furthest in seats on either side. They must have decided that the narrow café table would not have enough room for their plates if they sat right next to each other. Naruze sat on the entrance side and immediately grabbed the menu from the empty table next to her.

…*That leaves…*

Only the central seats were open. Asama took the one on the back end and Mitotsudaira sat next to Adele in the central entrance-side seat.

…*Phew.*

Asama sighed deep in her heart, but the only sign she let show on her face was her somewhat closed eyes. If she showed too much exhaustion and relief here, the others would only worry.

But across from her, Mitotsudaira’s shoulders noticeably rose and fell.

“Phew… We pushed ourselves a little too far this time.”

“Tired?” asked Kimi with a bitter smile.

“I can proudly say we did an excellent job,” replied Mitotsudaira with a small smile.

“Judge. That’s right. I never thought heading out on an investigation would mean dragon hunting. And 4 of them at that.”

Adele sounded cheerful and Asama could only nod in agreement. But then Asama lowered her head.

“Sorry about all the trouble. Thank you very much for dealing with that and helping me out.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Naruze who was listing up her order on a Magie Figure.

But Kimi…

“Feel free to thank me more, Asama! More! More!”

Naruze glared at her, but Kimi ignored it and pointed at Asama.

“I will admit I did not expect a serious life-or-death situation there. Who could predict a bunch of Hidden Dragons would show up and swing their heads around like tentacles!? But I did my best, so make sure to thank me! Now, bring on the thanks!”

She did not hesitate to hold out her hands with an expectant look in her eyes, so Asama thought about what this meant.

But this was a crazy person. Asama decided thinking about it was a futile effort, so she tried directly asking.

“What do you want?”

“You don’t know? What a useless shrine maiden! Okay, here’s your answer: take it away, Mitotsudaira!”

“Why are you passing it off to me!?”

Kimi looked over and spoke to Mitotsudaira.

“C’mon, Mitotsudaira, think carefully. What kind of service do you want from Asama? Suzu’s family runs two bathhouses, so anything goes. Oh, but if it’ll make Asama cry, wait until we get to her house, okay?”

“What are you trying to get her to ask for!?”

"Eh?" Kimi held up a sign frame. "A marathon of the theatre movies that my foolish brother recommended recently. They're playing things like 'Hamlet II: A Cutlet Disguised as an Omelet' or 'The Merchant of Extortion'. I want to set the player up somewhere with decent acoustics, but when you start crying at things like this, you can't seem to stop. …Or were you imagining something else?"

"Nooo, I wasn't imagining anything at allll. I had a feeling that was what you were talking abouuuut."

But Mitotsudaira seemed to have a thought.

"Well," she said in a tone of surprisingly serious thought. "Tomo, I'd like you to show me the musical instruments at your home later."

"Eh?"

It was true the Asama Shrine had a selection of Gagaku equipment. They were mostly for her exclusive use, but…

…Why would she want to see those?

Asama could not figure this out, but she had no problem letting her see them. And if they did that later…

"Do you want to sleep over at my place?"

"Oh, then I'll go too. Let's go refresh ourselves at Suzu's bathhouse first."

Adele nodded at that, but…

"I have a job early tomorrow morning, so I'll leave after Suzu-san's place."

"Same here. …And we have a lot to think about with what happened today," said Naruze. Her tone was calm and she did not even look Asama's way. "We haven't fought in an actual battle since the school trip in middle school, but that was very meaningful. …It was very eye-opening."

"I see," said Asama as she looked across from Naruze where the girl's partner sat.

…Ah.

That other girl was looking at the menu without reading it.

She was probably thinking about something, so…

“Naito?”

“Eh? Oh, sorry, sorry. I’m hogging the menu, aren’t I? …Ga-chan, can you order something for me too?”

“Only if you promise to eat everything I order for you.”

“Sure,” said Naito as she started focusing on the menu in her hand again.

As the two of them started speaking to each other (“Have we ever ordered that before?” “Yes, but we got it to go and it was cold by the time we ate it.”), Asama looked to the back of the café. She had heard footsteps approaching from the kitchen.

She noticed Kimi had already turned in that direction to see who it was.

…The manager. Toori-kun and Kimi’s mom.

Except it was not.

Asama saw silver hair, and…

…Huh?

By the time she realized how familiar the clothing looked, the newcomer had arrived next to the table.

The newcomer had a tray in one hand and she bowed.

“Welcome.”

Mitotsudaira felt all her hair bristling.

…Eh?

Was this a new employee at the Blue Thunder? She was an automaton. She had silver hair, she had a medium build, and her breasts were-… *It is foolish to compare yourself to others, so let’s not do that.*

But Mitotsudaira was reminded of something Kimi had mentioned that morning.

Her king was trying to win over another girl.

But why did she recall that now? No, she knew exactly why: the automaton standing in front of her.

…She…

Mitotsudaira knew her.

No.

She did not know her.

They had never met before, but Mitotsudaira still felt confident she knew her.

She did not want to definitively say she did not know her. There was an odd feeling of discord that made her want to know who this was. She wanted to know yet she had not forgotten. That was the only way to describe this confusion in her memories.

And…

“————”

What does this mean? wondered Mitotsudaira.

“She” was supposed to be dead. He had lamented, Mitotsudaira’s promise to protect “her” had vanished, she had acted violently, and the two of them had exchanged a promise as king and knight.

…That is where my pride as a knight comes from.

Even if “she” returned, Mitotsudaira would no longer be “her” protector. She was now a knight who would accompany her king.

But, thought Mitotsudaira.

…Is this automaton “her”?

She had not confirmed that, so any thoughts on the matter were premature.

But how could she confirm it?

If she called "her" name, would this automaton respond?

"Hori-…"

But just as the name began to leave her mouth, the automaton suddenly spoke.

"I have some not good news and some bad news. Which would you like first?"

"Eh?"

Asama saw the confused look on Mitotsudaira's face.

She could only guess what Mitotsudaira was thinking, but…

…I-I think I'm feeling much the same thing.

This automaton looked a lot like "her".

Of course, "she" died 9 years before. A lot had happened between Asama, Kimi, and Toori then and a lot had happened with their friends afterwards to help them all come to terms with what had happened to "her".

But now an automaton that resembled "her" was here.

And another thought occurred to Asama.

…Kimi said Toori-kun is trying to win over a girl.

Asama immediately sensed that this was that girl. And…

"Um," she said and the automaton nodded.

"Which would you like first?"

"Uhh…" said everyone but Kimi.

…Should we really just go along with this?

At any rate, Asama shove this onto someone else.

"You go ahead, Adele."

"Eh!? Ehh!? Me!?"

"Judge. So you are Adele-sama. An excellent name. Oh, but this is merely sales talk, so do not take it seriously."

"Wow…" said Naruze while hiding her face behind the menu.

Then the automaton spoke to Adele.

"I will give you a chance."

"Wh-what does that mean!?"

"Whether you choose the bad news or the not good news, something horrible will happen to you."

"It will…!?"

"Judge," replied the automaton.

"Incredible," said Naito while also hiding her face behind a menu.

After pausing for a breath, the automaton expressionlessly continued.

"And now I gave you enough time to run away, but you failed to do so. It is all over for you now."

"Eh!? That's what you meant by a chance!? I didn't even get a hint at what you meant!?"

"A failure to think leads only to death." The automaton remained expressionless. "Hasn't it long been said that people are thinking tools?"

"Are you sure you're not mixing 'speaking tool' with 'thinking reed'?"

"I fused them for a power-up."

She sounded so sure of herself that everyone but Kimi exchanged a glance. But Asama placed a hand on Kimi's shoulder while the girl faced the other way.

"Wait."

Her hand was brushed off. She placed her hand back on and found the idiot sister's shoulders were shaking with laughter.

“P-01s’s debut is turning out even better than I had hoped.”

“Is this why you brought us here!?”

“Now, now.” The automaton tilted her head. “I do not quite understand, but I am glad if I have brought in some customers.”

Now, then.

“Adele-sama, which will it be?”

Everyone looked to Adele who raised her eyebrows and looked back at them all.

“E-everyone! Are you all really willing to leave your destinies in my hands!?”

“Not to worry, Adele-sama. …This is for you alone.”

“Asama-san! Asama-san! Why did you have to pass this on to me!?”

“Well, you’re closest to the entrance, so I thought you would naturally come first.”

“I didn’t want a logical answer!”

Adele clenched her fists and steeled herself.

“Th-then, the bad news!”

“Judge. Then here is a stew with no soy sauce in it.”

The automaton set down a stew bowl from the stretcher she had carried over at some point. And it contained…

“This provides the perfect harmony of radish, carrot, and onion. I assume. I had to get somewhat creative to make the broth so clear.”

“Eh? What do you mean by creative?”

“Judge. I did not put any soy sauce in.”

“That’s not creative! That’s not creative at all!”

“Not to worry. I included sake as a secret ingredient. Dishes with a secret ingredient are delicious, so this stew must be delicious.”

“I’m not sure what to say to that…”

Was this a new type of sake stew? But Adele hung her head, pushed the bowl over to Asama, and spoke with a shadow of her face.

“This one’s yours, Asama-san.”

“You can’t do that, Adele. You have to eat what you’re served.”

“B-but don’t you love sake, Asama-san!? This one’s clearly perfect for you!”

Where did this misunderstanding come from? wondered Asama as she took a breath and corrected her.

“What are you talking about, Adele? I don’t love sake. I only drink it because I have to.”

“Um, Tomo? That’s exactly what alcoholics say.”

Huh? she thought just as the automaton named P-01s turned toward Mitotsudaira.

She turned just her head to look into Mitotsudaira’s golden eyes.

“You are next.”

“Eh? M-me?”

“Judge.” P-01s nodded, placed a hand on her forehead, and shut her eyes. “I will now guess your name.”

“Fortunetelling!? You’re doing fortunetelling now!? What happened to the ‘not good news/bad news’ thing with Adele!?”

“I grew bored with it.”

Asama placed a hand on Kimi’s shoulder only to have it brushed off.

But the situation was underway. P-01s said “now, then” and pointed at Mitotsudaira with the hand that had been on her forehead. Then she deeply lowered her head and spoke directly at Mitotsudaira.

“I know the answer now. Your name is…”

Mitotsudaira felt a solid sensation deep in her gut.

…D-does she know?

"She" would definitely know Mitotsudaira's name. And even if "she" pretended not to, Mitotsudaira was confident she could see through the bluff, so she stared at the automaton and asked for confirmation.

"Judge. My name is…?"

She immediately received her answer.

"Nakamura."

Mitotsudaira had no idea what look she had on her face.

But Asama gave her as "pull yourself together" look from across the table, so she must have seemed on the verge of fainting.

"I'm impressed she went straight for a family name instead of a given name," said Kimi, sounding calm.

But then the automaton clearly added to her answer.

"…-nov."

"Y-you just forced it to sound Russian, didn't you!?"

"I was wrong? And after I tried so hard."

"You didn't try at all!"

Asama saw Mitotsudaira stand up and place a hand on her chest.

"I am Chancellor's Officers Extra Special Duty Officer and Rank 1 Musashi Knight Nate Mitotsudaira! My Urban Name is Argent Loup! I rule the Mito reservation on the mainland and I am 2nd in line to ruling the Far East."

"Judge. I am the automaton designated P-01s. I boarded at Mikawa, but I have no memories. I collapsed from hunger, my vision grew white on the verge of death, and my analysis told me 'so this is how they welcome me', but then I was taken in. At first I was needlessly suspicious, stayed in the corner of the room, doubted people's kindness, and showed off how dangerous I was by shadow boxing, but lately I have been living a peaceful life mostly on Tama. Today a shrine maiden group visited the café, so I decided to introduce myself with the ‘bad news/not good news’ bit.”

“She just explained everything to me all at once!!”

“Heh heh heh. You’ve clearly lost this round, Mitotsudaira!”

As Mitotsudaira unwittingly bought them some time, Asama quickly performed a search.

She checked the Musashi resident registration data. There was indeed a room in Tama’s underground area rented out for a Blue Thunder employee. The Blue Thunder manager’s name was listed as the guarantor, and…

…It currently has a resident…

That resident was P-01s. She was listed as an automaton belonging to the Blue Thunder. But…

“…?”

As she dug into the search results, Asama’s confusion grew.

Her first question was how this new resident had not been reported to her, the Asama Shrine Representative.

The Asama Shrine handled the ether fuel supply and the application of divine protections to rooms, so they were automatically notified to changes in resident management.

This was because Musashi’s residents were a portion of the Musashi’s weight and also received a supply of fuel and divine protections. Unlike when living in a city on the surface of the earth, people here were a burden just by existing. Even the provisional residential districts on the first port and starboard ships were managed on a district by district basis and it was nearly impossible to live in the Musashi’s high altitude environment without various divine protections provided by one’s hard points.

…So all residents must be approved by “Musashi”-san, the different committee heads, and the guards.

The data on residents was managed by the Asama Shrine, each block, each ship, and the Musashi as a whole. It was also stored in and distributed within the Musashi databank at IZUMO.

All that information was automated using spell programs and the Mice in charge, but people did not enter or leave Musashi often.

So Asama had a habit of glancing through the photos of the resident's faces, but…

…I didn't get this one.

She was confused. This had been standard practice for years, but it had not been done. Was it childish that she felt more anger at the rules not being followed than anxiety at finding no explanation for this?

She glanced over at Hanami who was tilting her head.

Hanami assisted Asama with the resident management, so if she did not know…

…That must mean…

Asama checked the bottom of the search results for the underground Tama room where P-01s lived. And then she sighed.

The very bottom field listed the final supervisor and it was not her.

It was her father.

I see, thought Asama as she realized how this had happened but not why.

Her father had long been friends with the Aoi siblings' parents who managed this café.

The management must have had some reason or seen the possibility for trouble, so they discussed it with her father and he decided to manage this case.

…He should have discussed it with me.

She often came to the Blue Thunder. In fact, it was the best place for her father's decidedly non-Shinto requests: "I want to eat pizza" or "Have you heard of ham cutlets?"

So she was obviously going to notice this automaton eventually.

…Were they trying to take on responsibility for this?

If there was some kind of trouble, responsibility sometimes fell on the shrine that had managed the individual involved. It was just like a feudal lord taking responsibility for a resident who caused a major incident.

But that was only when the resolution went beyond the shrine or feudal lord level and required a national or international response.

That would be something she could not handle as the Asama Shrine's #2. But…

"_________"

Asama saw the automaton serve several black objects onto the plate in front of Mitotsudaira.

"Now, Mitotsudaira-sama, these are fried eggs. Please have all 5. …Do not worry. They are true fried eggs. After all, I fried some eggs. It was not easy doing so without breaking the shell. They have grown quite hard just like baked ceramics, so I will provide a hammer."

Was the phrase "after all" really necessary when describing your cooking?

Anyway, thought Asama.

…If dad is taking responsibility but leaving things on the scene to us…

She needed to treat this meeting with care.

"Yes."

"What is it, Tomo?" asked Mitotsudaira.

"Well," said Asama.

Thinking about this too deeply would not help. The automaton resembled "her", but she had no way of confirming that, the automaton had no memories, and the adults had not prevented them from meeting. So…

"I think we should treat this like normal until something happens and we have to decide on a stance."

"That's right."

There was a hint of relief in Mitotsudaira's slight smile. And then Kimi spoke up from the side.

"P-01s, can you take our order? Because your side show was extremely entertaining."

"Things sure were noisy outside…"

The bridge-shaped ship's bridge on Musashino was supported by two panel-shaped pillars on either side. Masazumi walked inside one of those while running an errand for her father on the way back from a part-time job interview.

She was walking through an extremely tall structure and she was heading downwards. There was a labor-powered lift if she was in a hurry, but…

…*The inner wall stairway has such a nice view.*

The inner hull to protect the vital parts was thin on the inner wall. To allow evacuation in an emergency, it had windows at a set interval, but those gave a view of Musashino's blocks and the opposite ship.

It was already night. The stealth barrier sky was much closer from up here and she could see the current of the periodically renewed barrier beyond Musashino's bridge.

Aki's sky would exist beyond that. That was K.P.A. Italia's night sky.

Just a month before, she had lived further west in Mikawa.

"When your environment changes, it really changes."

But…

"I'm still not used to this…"

Musashino's lights were on below to represent this busy time of night. She still had trouble matching up this view from above with the horizontal view she normally had.

"Ah."

The document she held fell from below her arm.

It was Musashi's income and expenditure report. In addition to providing each division's financial income and expenditures divided out by nation, it provided news on the wartime status of the other nations and on Musashi's relationships with the other nations.

…They said this was handled by the giant data processing facility on Musashino and that the automatons all understand this through their shared memory.

The amounts and contents could be sent via divine transmission and checked on a sign frame, but…

"With sign frame data, humans try to look into it too much."

Masazumi picked up the document while glad all the pages had remained in a clump.

When each page of data was too clear, humans tried to check through it all.

But that increased their concern and exhaustion, so as time passed, they would overlook more and view it less deeply. But…

"We can't just leave it all to the automatons either."

Masazumi flipped through the document as she resumed walking.

The automatons had already checked over most of the income and expenditure report, but they had marked the values that they could not explain given their previous data and they had marked the results they determined to be especially good or bad.

Those were the areas they had decided needed interpretation by the humans.

Automatons would always make the best possible decision.

So when they could not make a decision, choosing to not make a decision was the best possible option.

That was where the humans came in.

After receiving this document from "Nishi-Kokubunji", the automaton aide to Musashino Captain "Musashino", Masazumi had received the following explanation:

“We would like for the members of the Provisional Council to check over the areas marked ‘important’ or anything that catches their attention. Over.”

“…What do you mean that catches their attention?”

“Nishi-Kokubunji” had responded by tilting her head.

And then she had straightened her head again.

“I do not know how humans experience things, but it seems humans sometimes feel unease, feel doubt, or simply ask themselves ‘is this right?’. Over.”

I see, Masazumi had thought. That seemed awfully human for the strict Provisional Council, but it was probably an issue of being cautious and careful. However…

“And you’ll investigate the parts that catch their attention?”

“Judge. We will investigate them and provide them with the results.”

“And if there’s nothing wrong…then you’ll essentially be providing counselling for the Provisional Council’s worries?”

She had wondered what her father and the others would think if they heard that.

But “Nishi-Kokubunji” had tilted her head again and did not straighten it this time.

“The things that have caught the Provisional Council’s attention have only been wrong 20% of the time. Over.”

Masazumi had been at a loss for words, so she had said nothing.

“————” And she had thought to herself.

…Stupid.

That exchange showed that she had no experience in politics, in working at any real duties, or in finding these things that caught one’s attention.

And now she doubted if she was even able to notice things like that.

…Dammit.

This showed her just how large a gap there was between her and the Provisional Council members like her father.

But "Nishi-Kokubunji" had straightened her head and bowed.

Then she had looked at Masazumi with somewhat closed eyes and spoken.

"Do you require counselling? Over."

"No. …Thank you very much."

"Judge. Is that so? Over."

"…Why do you sound so disappointed?"

"Judge." "Nishi-Kokubunji" had nodded and averted her gaze. "Recently, that Aoi Toori-sama has started visiting the bridge for no reason."

"…Oh, so you want a chance to do some proper counselling."

"I have determined it would be nice every once in a while. Over."

The way she put that let Masazumi know that boy was showing up a lot.

But "Nishi-Kokubunji" had had more to say.

"Either way, the Provisional Council, the Student Council, the Chancellor's Officers, the similar officers of the other nations, and anyone in a similar position must be equivalent monsters in some way, whether they would be able to drive off that previous mysterious phenomenon or not. Over."

The word "monsters" remained in Masazumi's mind.

It was true everyone had driven off the Hidden Dragons that had appeared outside the ship. She had been visiting the bridge when that happened. In case of an emergency, the automatons had asked her not to leave the bridge, so she had been able to monitor what was happening from inside the stealth barrier.

Mitotsudaira and some more of her classmates had ultimately defeated the Hidden Dragons by working together.

But the Student Council and Chancellor's Officers had been a little different. They too had worked together to defeat their enemy, but…

…Each one of them could fight well enough on their own too.

Was it just a difference in power?

The Class Plum group had made up for a lack of power by working together and finished off their enemy.

But with the Student Council and Chancellor's Officers, it had felt like they were each powerful enough to fight alone but had worked together to settle things more quickly.

A year really makes a difference, she thought.

"But I can't use how much older my father and the Provisional Council are as an excuse, can I?"

Or could she?

Did her class just not have that power? Or was it simply hidden inside them?

I really don't know, she thought with a sigh.

…Monsters, hm?

She thought on the term "mysterious phenomenon". And at that exact moment, she heard voices from the guard management floor down below.

"Some monsters have appeared on Musashino's bow!"

"A group of white sheets with legs has been spotted!"

"Everyone, borrow some anti-spirit equipment from your respective shrines! The Provisional Council was supposed to be having a dinner party in that area!"

The Provisional Council. That meant a mysterious phenomenon had appeared near where her father and the others were.

Masazumi checked her mental map of Musashi and realized she was near there.

…I need to hurry!

She looked to Musashino's bow outside the window as she ran down the stairs.

A nudist fell past that window with the bra-shaped chest of a Far Eastern girl's uniform clutched in his hand.

And Torii fell after him.

She fell with only the breastplate cloth covering her chest.

When she saw that, something occurred to Masazumi once more.

…I'm just not used to this place at all.

And so she cried out.

"Wahhh!!"

Chapter 19: Speakers on an Angled Surface

第十九章
『角面の語り人達』
この生活に
慣れる方法を誰か
配点（MU・RI）

Someone tell me

How I can get used to life here

Point Allocation (Not Possible)

Torii followed the nudist through the sky and saw Musashino's nightscape below.

"Hey! Toori! That was a pretty good one! Ah ha ha ha!"

"Yeah! Chuuko, you said you'd let me feel your boobs if I managed to steal your bra, right!?"

"True," replied Torii as she spread her arms and enjoyed the wind. "So what're you gonna do, Toori!? You're gonna fall at this rate."

The two of them laughed together with a 5 meter height difference between them.

Then Toori waved the hand not holding the bra.

"Don't worry, don't worry. I have a charm to control my fall!"

He then looked up above past her head.

But Torii did not look back. She knew what was up there: an investigation ship being towed to Okutama's rear deck. After all, she had been aboard it a moment before.

And this idiot had jumped down from the towing belt ring above it.

…*Honestly.*

Just as she had been fidgeting and wondering if she should jump down or not, the idiot had attacked her butt from behind for a kanchou, so she had circled behind him to hit him with a kanchou. Her mistake had been hesitating upon noticing he was naked. He had snapped his right hand back toward her chest.

But he had not pulled off her tube-shaped bra at quite the right angle, so they had both lost their balance and fallen.

That led to the present, but…

"Hey, Toori! If you ask me, we're gonna be in trouble soon."

"Huh!? Are you looking down on me cause I'm a 2nd year, Chuuko!? A game of chicken is all about seeing who panics and uses their spell first!”

“I’m not even going to respond.”

“Dammit! It’s always like this with people in power! You just ignore us normal students when we make jokes!”

“That’s the normal reaction.”

“Not for me!! Listen carefully!”

“The ground is getting awfully close. What’re you gonna do?”

“Huh!? Are you scared, Chuuko!? I’ve got a spell, but I’m not using it yet! Not a chance!”

“Oh, is that so? Well, Toori, is this the charm you were talking about?”

Torii pulled a charm out from her cleavage and showed it to the idiot.

The idiot wrapped the bra around his head and chin, crossed his arms, and nodded.

“Yeah! That’s it! How about that!? I came prepared, didn’t I!?”

“I swiped it from your hand earlier, but what’re you gonna do now that I have it?”

The idiot fell silent for a few seconds and then wrapped the bra around his waist.

“Give it back! Give back my spell!”

“No, I’m using it.”

“W-w-w-wa-wa-wa-wa-w-w-wa-wait, Ch-Ch-Ch-Chuuko. I-I-I’ll d-die, Chuuko.”

“Are you supposed to be rapping?”

And…

“Could you stop calling me Chuuko?”

“Brand new.”[2]

"You're really rude, you know that!? So what're you gonna do? The ground's really close now."

"Heh hehhh. Too bad! This is the Musashi, so it isn't the ground! … Ah! Please don't look up! Talk with me and give me that spell for free! In fact, Chuuko! If you don't talk with me, I'll wrap your bra around my dick!"

"You'll do that and then crash into the ground?"

"Are you sure you want that!? Are you really, really sure? Think about it, Chuuko! At this rate, you'll be known as the girl whose bra was wrapped around a dick! C'mon, listen carefully! Can't you hear your bra crying!? 'Noooooo, I don't want to be a dick-braaaa!' "

"You're gonna die soon. I'll be nice and give you some advice: why not go crying to 'Musashi'?"

"Oh, right!" The idiot struck a meaningless pose. " 'Musashi'! I'd be really happy if you save me right away!"

A sign frame appeared.

"You are on Musashino, so please ask 'Musashino'. Over."

"Hey, 'Musashino'!"

"Sorry. I am busy right now. Ask 'Nishi-Kokubunji'. Over."

"I am busy as well. Next up is 'Kokubunji'. Over."

"Next up is 'Kunitachi'. 'Kunitachi'. Over."

"Please make your stop at 'Tachikawa'. Over."

"Please start deadheading. Over."

"Wait! Wait, all of you! You're trying to cause me trouble by pretending to be train stations, aren't you!? You are, aren't you!? Do you love me that much!? I'm gonna blush!!"

A defense barrier opened below the idiot.

Adele looked out the window while everyone ate the vegetable soup the manager had made.

She looked into Musashino's sky.

"Um, I'm seeing quite a lot of defense barriers being broken over there…"

"Yes," said Mitotsudaira, Kimi, and Asama as they looked over at the same time. "My king." "Foolish brother." "Toori-kun."

As they said that, the bottommost sign frame disappeared and decorated the nighttime city.

Torii looked around below the scattering light.

He was in one of Musashino's surface blocks. It was a student residential district filled with student dorms. The students around him were more puzzled by the light of the defense barriers bursting in the air than they were of the fallen object.

While they all looked up instead of down, Torii sighed in relief that no one was paying any attention to them. And so she spoke without panicking.

"Hey, idiot."

"Oh, Chuuko. Over here! I'm over here!"

She turned back and saw the idiot's upper body poking up from a human-shaped hole in the middle of the road.

"Did the defense barriers not stop your fall?"

"The last one disappeared before it caught me, so 'Musashi' must be pretty mad."

Torii approached the idiot who sat there like he was in the bath, leaned back against the edge of the hole, and looked up into the sky.

"You really are dumb."

When she crouched in front of the hole, the idiot looked her way and did not hesitate to stare right between her crouching legs.

"Stay like that! Just like that! It's bright up above, so my eyes haven't adjusted enough to see through the darkness there!"

“It’s just the panties part of my inner suit. You see that all the time. How about a pose? I’ll thrust my hips out like this.”

“It’s no good if it’s fake!”

“Aren’t all performances fake?”

“Don’t test me just because you’re high-level and I’m mid-level, Chuuko.”

“I see,” she said before laughing.

She got into the hole legs-first and sat across from him like it was a bathtub.

“Ow, ow, ow! It’s too cramped, Chuuko! If you wanna get in a hole, make your own.”

“You’ve got a pretty skinny body. I bet you could do some killer crossdressing material.”

“Oh, judge, judge. I was short on points when qualifying for the mid-level, so I went with that! Asama judged it with the most hilarious look on her face, but sis absolutely loved it.”

“What about the Koumon girl?”

“Nate couldn’t bear to watch!”

“I see…”

Torii looked up into the sky. The sky itself was covered by the stealth barrier ceiling, but she could see the observation ship being towed below that. However, it was mostly hidden by the light of the broken defense barriers.

Torii stared at the Musashi in the sky.

“Did anything good happen to you?”

“Judge,” said the nudist. “All sorts of good things happen to me every day.”

“Are you bragging?”

“Yep. I’ve got friends who’ll hang out with me and cause a fuss, and there are others who will at least worry for me. It’s great to just have something, you know?”

“That’s a pretty low bar.”

“I haven’t forgotten to dream big.”

“You mean that old promise?”

“Yeah.” The idiot also looked into the sky. “Everyone’s so amazing. You saw that today, didn’t you? They defeated a dragon.”

“Doesn’t that make us pretty amazing, too?”

“Then you come with us too, Chuuko.”

Torii fell silent at that, but it did not last long.

“If it works out and I feel like it.”

“I see.”

They both leaned back while facing each other, but the idiot soon spoke up.

“Ah, wait, wait, wait. Chuuko, your butt’s hitting my mosaic!”

“Ohh, I thought that was a piece of the ship, but it’s yours, huh? Since you’re against fakes, I guess you must really be aroused.”

“You idiot, you’ve got a knife stored near your butt, don’t you!? That and your butt are holding my emblem of power like a vise.”

“It’s sheathed, so you’ll be fine. It’s only a decoration to use in my dances anyway.”

Torii then got back on topic.

“I’ll ask again: What was so great that happened to you?”

“Well, it was like I saw nothing.”

“Huh?”

The idiot watched the light in the sky gradually fade and thin out.

“We share our dreams. We don’t know how far we can go or how it’ll turn out, but we still go for it, you know?”

"It's true your class has always stood out and it's grown even more striking of late."

"Yeah, so me and the others always had our dreams, but I've started noticing someone who doesn't have a dream, doesn't have anything to enjoy, and doesn't have anything good happen to her."

But…

"But she does seem to have something she can work at in the present."

"Sounds like a machine."

"Horizon would've said the same thing."

"Hey." Torii looked at him instead of the light in the sky. "If you're gonna go back to how you used to be, I'll kick your ass."

"That's not it," said the idiot. "Right now, I have everything. I have friends who will make my dream come true. They're preparing to do that now and I haven't forgotten it. But there is something we don't have."

Namely…

"We don't have 'nothing'."

So…

"If I could show something to her, then I could say that my…that *our* promises and dreams are the real deal."

"Have you fallen for this person?"

"Nothing could happen unless I have."

"True," agreed Torii. "You have to fall for someone to get things started, but then no one's going to fall for you."

"What do you mean? Oh, sorry. I just said the first thing that popped into my mind to sound cool, but you answered seriously. Um, and I'm getting a little hard, but you can just stay like that."

"Go to hell. And anyway…"

She sighed and wondered if he really understood.

"You share so much with the others, so if you've fallen for this girl, then the others will probably notice her…charm? And fall for her as well. And if that girl falls for you, then she'll also fall for the others. You're all in this together, right? …I mean, you're already sharing more than just your dream with Kimi and a few others, right? You're sharing a way of life, aren't you?"

So…

"Those who you've gone as far as sharing a way of life with will also share their way of life with the girl you've fallen for."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't make a girl say it."

She could only smile bitterly, but the idiot thought for a bit and spoke.

"Oh, I get it! Sis and the others will steal this girl from me! And that's why you brought up crossdressing earlier, Chuuko! I get it now! I need to become a girl and share everything with them!"

"Hmm. Then should I help you become a girl?"

Torii twisted the idiot with the knife handle and her butt.

While the nudist arched his back and shook violently, Torii sighed and looked into the sky once more.

Darkness had already returned to the sky, but it was still somewhat bright due to the stealth barrier.

"So even when it's dark, it's bright."

Honestly.

"I've got so much to think about. I have a feeling I need to make the festival pretty exciting."

A meeting was held at the Blue Thunder.

In the center, Asama tore off a piece of her rice bread and used her chopsticks to grab some bacon and onion fried with ginger.

She also spoke about something she could only mention here. It included too much speculation for someone from the Asama Shrine.

"I can only speculate, but it seems to me that the Non-Dragon Sword, Hidden Dragons, and Mito's Cerberus are all related."

"!"

Mitotsudaira looked to the 3 barking heads on top of her own head. She cut in half one of the hunks of bacon sliced extra thick for her and she placed it between two pieces of bread.

"You mean there's a connection between this Cerberus and those Hidden Dragons?"

"This is a conflict between the local gods and a stagnation. …Well, um, that's what I think anyway. Yes, it seems that way."

"Local gods?" asked a puzzled voice. It came from a sign frame showing Suzu tilting her head while drinking some milk in her bathhouse's changing room. "They…fight?"

"That's right. Local gods are something like nameless spirits. They work below the earthly gods who rule over that region and the primary gods of the temples, so they generally leave any conflict to those higher gods."

But…

"I don't like saying anything about un-worshiped gods, but those local gods are much closer to the ley lines than the systemized Shinto gods or the other gods. They take the primitive form of spirits, so you could say they're a lot closer to ether than the gods who were originally deified humans."

"Heh heh. And what does that mean?"

"They can detect the future through the flow of the ley lines. In the legends, it is those local gods who move out ahead of the gods when they march into battle, but that means they are the guides to the 'future'. So…"

Asama gave the conclusion of her speculation.

"They must be here to protect the Musashi."

Naruze had been viewing a drawing thread on her Magie Figur, but now she asked a question with bread in hand.

“Any proof?”

“The stagnation,” said Asama. “I can’t say for sure, but I think a ley line stagnation has followed the Musashi from the Mikawa region.”

…Just saying a stagnation is following us is probably a little confusing.

Asama doubted the others would understand just from that. After all, the ley lines and stagnations were invisible things. So she opened a sign frame, placed it horizontally so it could not be seen from outside, and placed it in the center of the table.

It displayed a map of the Far East. The area from P.A. Oda’s Kinki to the Kii Peninsula was blank, but…

“I’m seeing a really tall red pillar at Mikawa,” said Naito.

“These are the statistics on the appearance of mysterious phenomena. It’s only the ones IZUMO knows about, though.”

Asama sensed everyone gasp. That was hardly surprising. After all, the pillars only rose finger height from the other areas, but at Mikawa…

…It rises up to our eye level.

However…

“Tomo, wait a moment.”

“Oh, you noticed, Mito? …What about you, Kimi? Have you noticed?”

“Judge. …It’s not just the size of your pillar that matters. Isn’t that what you meant, Mitotsudaira?’

“No!!”

Mitotsudaira placed her hand on the top of the mysterious phenomena pillar rising to eye level.

“This is a cumulative amount. But some mysterious phenomena like strange noises are instantaneous, while others like hauntings are continuous. So if all of these were instantaneous, the greater numbers would not actually do much damage. And in Mikawa specifically, the Atsuta types should be purifying them with prayer song attacks and with keystone carpet bombings. But if you look at the continuous ones…”

As Mitotsudaira spoke, the height of the pillars began to change.

Asama had changed the display setting. She had removed the low-level or instantaneous mysterious phenomena.

“Clap.”

Hanami spun around as the pillars shrank. Mitotsudaira’s eyebrows rose in a smile as she watched it.

“Yes, that’s right. Even if things seem ominous around Mikawa, it’s hardly a lost cau-…”

She came to an abrupt stop.

The pillars had stopped shrinking and Adele commented on the remaining height.

“More than half of it wasn’t swallowed up?”

“Since the pillar is red, maybe it thought it was tomato juice.”

But Mitotsudaira looked at Asama from beyond the pillar.

“Since when?”

“This is cumulative, remember? Oh, I’ll show just the ones that have continued for more than week. I can also show you the ones that are longer than a month.”

“No, no.”

They all shook their head and P-01s arrived to give them more bread. Adele and the two Technohexen took it and Mitotsudaira modestly asked for more meat.

“Um, I would like a shoulder roast ham steak…”

“1 foot?”

“N-no, of course not. Make it 1 inch.”

That really is modest, thought Asama, but she also asked for something more.

“Do you have any seasonal fruit?”

“Whole or hand-squeezed? For the latter, I grab it on either side like someone’s head and…urah! No, I do not actually say ‘urah’. That was an imaginary voice. Now, what would you like?”

“Um, whole is fine…”

“Judge. That is too bad.”

P-01s’s shoulders drooped and she left. Then everyone sighed. Naito spoke first while looking out the window.

“Asama-chi, I was kind of hoping you would order it ‘urah!’, so now I’m bored.”

“That’s right, Margot. I’m feeling Weiss Techno bored.”

“You’ve turned into such a boring girl, Asama…”

“Is everyone my enemy!? Is everyone here my enemy!?”

“But,” cut in Mitotsudaira. “What does this mean?”

Asama nodded at the question Mitotsudaira asked with lowered eyebrows.

“It looks quite unusual like this, but this accumulation of mysterious phenomena is not all that harmful, so the Shinto organizations are not treating it like a big deal. These ones only lead people astray, confuse morning and evening, or bring rain at unnatural times, so they don’t mess with an entire region and don’t create a hotbed of the monster-type mysterious phenomena.”

Also…

“Mikawa is continuing its policy of clearing out all the people and populating itself with automatons. …There are a lot of mysterious phenomena around New Nagoya Castle, but its ley line reactor is very attractive to the other nations due to the items produced there, inventions developed there, and experiments run there. So with most of the residents living outside the city, the other nations are turning a blind eye to the mysterious phenomena.”

“And Tres España is more or less stationed at Mikawa’s land port, presumably to get at their products,” said Adele as she spread butter on her rice bread. “They claim to be protecting Mikawa’s land port as an intermediary port for Tres Portugal’s trade with Kantou, but they’re probably planning to take over Mikawa in an emergency. …But, Asama-san?”

“What?”

“Tres España, Holland, and England visit Mikawa to trade with Kantou, but do they end up with those giant dragon mysterious phenomena like we did?”

“They have never ended up with any that large.”

Asama responded while opening a sign frame, displaying the trade fleets that had left Mikawa, and showing the number of mysterious phenomena that had occurred within them.

Several red pillars rose, but…

“When I divide it out by time, they have barely any after leaving Mikawa. But when they arrive in another port after leaving, the number rises. Mikawa’s stagnations get into the fleet’s ‘mold’ and reacts when they arrive in a different land. But most of them are tuned while in flight, so it does not lead to an emergency.”

“Then, Tomo, why did we get that Non-God Sword and dragons this time?”

“The Non-God Sword was a stagnation from Aki. Our stagnation was used by the local gods to create the Cerberus.”

“Then,” said Naruze. “What about the Hidden Dragons and Non-Dragon Sword?”

“I think the Hidden Dragons came from a stagnation that pursued the Musashi from Mikawa. Look.”

Asama stood up and displayed a map of the Musashi on the sign frame in the center of the table.

She displayed the ether pathways that started at the Asama Shrine in the center and connected to IZUMO and the other shrines. She also displayed the ether defenses, buffering spell defense barriers, and the divine protections placed inside the ships, individual rooms, and passageways.

“Musashi has very strong defenses against ley line stagnations, partially to preserve the ship itself. At least while inside the stealth barrier, our anti-mysterious phenomena system is on the same level as the K.P.A. Italia capital of Rome, Hexagone Française’s Paris, and the center of England’s London. But…”

“Judge.” Naito nodded. “None of that matters outside the defenses, so the stagnations are drawn to where the defenses aren’t.”

“Right. In Aki’s case, Rome is so perfectly defended that the stagnations tend toward Aki. Aki had not sent yesterday’s theatre ship out in a while, so it was the perfect material for a stagnation to attach to. Similarly…”

Asama hesitated for a moment but said it.

“If the Musashi travels near a stagnation large enough to envelop it, it will attract the stagnation like a bug zapper and that stagnation will stubbornly follow us around. Anything within range of the Musashi’s defenses – so us and the ship’s equipment – will be just fine, but if the stagnation is large enough to envelop all that, we can’t fully purify it.”

“And how did we not notice a stagnation like that?”

“The biggest reason is that it was outside the range of our defenses. But…”

Asama nodded and drew a circle around the Musashi.

“It looks to me like the stagnation is surrounding the Musashi like this. Oh, and the stagnation isn’t inside the circle; the line is the stagnation. Think of it like a balloon full of holes. Everything inside the circle really should be a stagnation, but…”

“Heh heh. You can brag if you want. Tell us the Asama Shrine has erased the stagnation inside the circle and pushed it out to the edges, creating that giant hole.”

“That’s right. Most of the stagnation was already carved away by the Musashi. But…when something happens, the balloon-like film gathers in one spot.”

She gathered the circular line together with her finger.

That formed a stagnation the size of a small ship that directly faced the Musashi.

Naruze sighed.

“So it’s like how scraps of paper don’t look like much, but seem like a lot once you ball them up? Even a thin film can create a dragon when you gather it together.”

“Yes, it’s a common pattern with stagnations. For example, those that cause strange noises in your house or that cause water or rocks to fall from the sky. They’re normally quite thin, but when something happens they gather together all at once and manifest themselves. I’ve never heard of it happening on as large a scale as this, but the Hidden Dragon’s appearance was a lot like that of strange noises. This is just on such a large scale that it should be able to recover very quickly.”

“Then,” said Suzu in the sign frame. “What do…we do?”

“We purify it.”

“Heh heh. Are you going to shoot it!? You’re going to shoot it, aren’t you!? You’re going to shoot like crazy outside the Musashi’s defenses, aren’t you!?”

“No, that wouldn’t work here. Besides, the stagnation had a dragon ‘mold’ this time and, as you could see from the Hidden Dragon flying toward the Kojima Peninsula to recover, the stagnation is like a giant clump. So…”

Everyone nodded and answered in unison:

“You’re going to shoot it?”

“Let’s get our minds off that, okay? What we need to do is…”

At that point, the Blue Thunder’s door opened and someone walked in.

“…‘Musashi’-san?”

“Judge.” The automaton bowed. “At the request of the Student Council and with Principal Sakai’s approval, I have come to probe you about something. Over.”

"Probe?" said Kimi as she lightly struck Asama's breasts.

Asama raised her right fist, so the idiot sister escaped while shouting, "There's plenty in there! It was nice and firm!" But that did not matter, so Asama asked a question.

"Do you have a request for the Asama Shrine?"

"I believe you more or less know what this is about, but…it concerns the Gagaku Festival. Over."

"I see." Asama nodded. She did more or less know what she had to do. "At the Gagaku Festival, you want me to fully extract the ley line stagnation around the Musashi and then purify it on the theatre ship, don't you?"

"Musashi" nodded to tell Asama she was correct.

" 'Okutama' examined the previous incident and we have determined that there is most likely an extremely thin ley line stagnation remaining around the Musashi. So this can all be solved by using the Gagaku Festival's ley line gathering and tuning process to gather and tune the stagnation. Over."

"Musashi" saw someone raise their hand. It was Mitotsudaira. The Cerberus on her head also raised its front paw and she spoke to "Musashi".

"What if the gathered stagnation becomes a Non-God Sword or Hidden Dragon?"

"Based on yesterday and today's cases, it will likely manifest itself using a 'mold'. So if that happens…"

"Musashi" gave her thoughts based on their cooperation and the records of them defeating the Hidden Dragons.

"I believe all of you will do something about it. Over."

"Musashi" saw everyone's mouths spread horizontally. She had intended that as a compliment, but they apparently did not see it that way. It was a rare reaction, so she made sure to record it.

"But," she began while looking to Asama. "We received a request from the Vice President earlier. It is for you, Asama-sama. Over."

"Eh? For me? …What is it?"

"Judge. It asks you to take part in the Gagaku Festival. The stage is the closest location to the extracted stagnation, so it would mean a lot for the Asama Shrine Representative to be there. Over."

"You mean…?"

She looked down a little and seemed hesitant to speak, so "Musashi" spoke instead.

"It can be hastily thrown together, but a position has been opened for you to perform either solo or in a band. You will be given the final performance. Here is your entry sheet."

"Musashi" opened the divine transmission entry sheet on a sign frame and then tossed it to Asama with a finger.

"Ah," she said as she caught it and stared at it instead of "Musashi".

"If you are going to perform in a band, please provide the band name before you submit it. Over."

Chapter 20: Respecter in a Warm Place

第二十章

『温場のリスペクター』

他人を抱いて
触って撫でて
揉んで頬寄せ
楽しむ方法は
配点（理解）

How do you enjoy

Embracing someone

Touching them and rubbing them

Massaging them and pressing your cheek against them?

Point Allocation (Understanding)

Suzu was working in the changing room.

She was pulling out and setting up an acoustic device in the corner of the changing room for the women's bath. The device named Accompaniment #3 was a wooden box sitting a meter tall, but it contained an entertainment god household shrine and an amplifier torii. Her father had told her it was like a tiny shrine, but her mother had said it was wasted on their family.

At the end of the month, a singing competition was held in the women's bath for the students who were their primary customers. That was what this device was used for. It was not the end of the month now, but…

…*We're all about to use it.*

She was surrounded by Asama, Kimi, Mitotsudaira, Naito, Naruze, and Adele.

They all held deck brushes, charms, and baskets as they replaced the consumable supplies and cleaned.

This was all because the Student Council had requested that Asama take part in the Gagaku Festival. To celebrate that and hold a planning meeting, they were going to discuss who she should perform with and other details.

So they were cleaning.

Suzu was thankful that Naruze and Naito were here because they were checking the output of the cauldron set up below the bath.

"Bell-yan, the output is probably shifting out of place here, so you need to keep an eye on that."

"I think the reinforced firewood is burning itself onto the bottom. It's hard to see due to the curve of the cauldron, so I'll use a quick soot-removing spell."

"Thank you," replied Suzu.

"It's a standard Technohexen spell since we enter through the chimney," said Naruze with a smile.

She used her pen to indicate 4 points on the bottom of the cauldron and connected those points. Suzu heard something peeling away on the bottom of the pot.

"Ohh," said Naito and Naruze blushed. But…

"Margot, this spell isn't Weiss or Schwarz."

"No, no. I'd just completely forgotten it since we live in Musashi's underground area and don't use a chimney."

Did that mean they had lived in a house with a chimney before coming here? They would probably tell Suzu if she asked, but checking on such trifling things could be exhausting. So she left those two to check on the cauldron while she handled what the others could not, as well as…

…F-fixing what they do wrong.

"Heh heh heh. Look, Mitotsudaira, look! …Persona-kun."

"Quit putting the buckets on your head and start stacking them up!"

Should I correct her or make a tsukkomi? wondered Suzu.

At any rate, everyone seemed more excited than before.

…Because they fought…a battle outside?

Wouldn't they normally settle down after that? Why were they so full of energy?

Because they're a warrior race? she wondered, but they were all from different nations. Besides she was fairly certain the concept of a warrior race was a fictional one from the manga named Pendragon Ball. Paper editions were hard for her to read, but with the divine transmission versions, she could have the dialogue vocalized and the ether-drawn lines were easy to sense. *The boys like Fist of the Northern Court, but I like Torikaebaya Monogatari: Kamakura from the other magazine.*

…Now, then.

Her preparations were complete. She decided to see how the others were doing and help them out if they needed it.

“…?”

She found one person who had barely made any progress at all.

“Asama…-san?”

Asama came back to her senses when Suzu called her name.

She was near the bath’s entrance.

After the battle outside and the meal at the Blue Thunder, they had come here to wash up and to make some plans. They had taken a bath and drank some strawberry milk. She had had two milks.

But none of it felt real.

…*Umm.*

Huh? How many calories are in two of them? she wondered. But the real problem was…

…*This.*

The sign frame.

She had been more focused on the sign frame in front of her than on the deck brush in her hands.

It contained the Gagaku Festival registration information.

After receiving the band page, she had double-checked what it said and then closed it countless times, but…

“Heh heh. Have you memorized what it says already?”

“Yes.”

She did not need Kimi to point out that she had looked through every word of it.

But it was not the document that mattered. It was what she would write there: band name, genre, instruments, number of members, and member details.

She could not decide all of that on her own, but…

…I can't help but imagine what I'll be writing here.

What would she do? Who would she do it with? What would they do it with? What would whoever she did it with think?

Those questions started reminding her of something.

…Naruze's porn douji-…no, nooooo. It isn't reminding me of that at alllll.

"Ah, don't turn away, Hanami!"

Anyway, Suzu had walked up and started helping her.

Yeah, I got too excited and haven't gotten anything done, she thought with a sigh, but according to Mitotsudaira…

"Tomo, you don't need to do any work here, so you can go rest in the changing room if you want."

"I don't like sitting around when other people are working…"

Meanwhile, she finished her job too. From there, they only had to wash off the floor with water and clap their hands in unison to purify it.

Then Kimi carried the device in from the changing room.

It was a karaoke acoustic device called Accompaniment #3. It had apparently been developed by a bard who wanted a backup band, but by #3, it had grown too large to carry with you on a journey.

…But if I'm going to sing a pop song with different acoustics than Kimi's Turning Point, what should I sing?

"Hmm," she groaned until Mitotsudaira spoke at her side.

"Tomo? If you're going to sing, we'll sing too. These spaces are for everyone to share. You don't need to get so tense. Just think of this as *nothing out of the ordinary* and don't worry about it."

"That's right," said Adele as she lightly spun her deck brush around. "We're glad we can help you do something so rare. You're always helping us out."

Adele's words seemed to contradict Mitotsudaira's, but Asama was thankful they were both being considerate.

And that may have been why she felt herself sigh.

"In other words." She smiled and raised her right index finger. "I need to take this easy, so I need to work hard at being casual?"

"You're being far too tense! Really, really tense!!"

Am I? she wondered while crossing her arms. Then she heard a quiet laugh.

It was Suzu. Her shoulders were shaking a little.

"That's a lot…like you, Asama-san…but also…not like you?"

"Really?" asked Mitotsudaira.

"Hm." Suzu tilted her head and suddenly answered. "Isn't it…a lot like…Toori-kun?"

Everyone's gone silent, thought Mitotsudaira.

Her eyes were on Asama who had frozen in place with her arms crossed.

"…Huh?"

Mitotsudaira responded to her question by looking at the others, but Kimi was the only one with a look of understanding. And Mitotsudaira was aware her own eyebrows were lowered and her mouth was spread horizontally.

Naito and Naruze were frowning and Adele simply tilted her head and asked a question.

"Do you grope people's boobs, flip up their skirts, and strip naked, Asama-san?"

"Have you ever seen me do any of that!? Of course I don't do those things!"

…The difference in lifestyle is just too great…

So Mitotsudaira took a half step forward to argue Asama's case.

"Listen, everyone. A pervert and a shrine maiden are two different things. Two very different things. So don't worry. They are opposites."

"But my foolish brother sometimes crossdresses, works as an Asama Shrine shrine maiden, and causes the boys to fall to their knees."

"Sorry, Kimi, but that is just a pervert acting like a shrine maiden."

"Then," said Naito while still frowning. She placed her index finger on her mouth and looked up at the ceiling in thought. "If they're opposites, does that make Asama-chi a shrine maiden acting like a pervert?"

"Let's not turn this into a false dichotomy!!"

Sorry. I was the one that set it up as two opposite extremes.

So Mitotsudaira looked to Suzu hoping to actually help this time.

"U-um, Suzu? Tomo isn't a pervert, right?"

"Heh heh. And what if that direct question receives a direct response?"

"Calm down," said Mitotsudaira as she waited for Suzu's answer.

"Well…"

"Heh heh. Just come out and say it! Oh, but if Asama is a pervert here, that means Suzu also sees my foolish brother as a pervert! Nice! Bring on the perverts!! C'mon! C'moooon!!"

Mitotsudaira was not sure what Kimi was talking about, so she focused on ignoring her. But Suzu nodded toward Kimi and smiled.

"She isn't…so don't…worry."

And…

"Both Asama-san…and Toori-kun…focus on other…people."

Suzu smiled at Asama.

"Asama-san…has trouble…thinking about…herself."

Everyone’s gone silent, thought Asama.

But Kimi circled behind Suzu.

“____________”

Kimi embraced Suzu from behind, touched various parts of her body, and rubbed her cheek against her with a thin smile. And each time her hands moved to massage Suzu’s body…

“Ah, hyah, wh-what?”

The girl sounded confused, but Asama knew that was one way Kimi expressed her affection.

…She just wants to touch and feel the things she loves…

It was different from “skinship”.

She wanted to confirm that what she loved really was there and she wanted to find out just what it was, so she would embrace it and touch it with her entire body.

But, thought Asama.

Her mind turned toward her being like Toori.

…Is that true?

She might indeed focus on others as part of her shrine maiden job. After all, shrine maidens had originally served and focused on their god. She had learned that way of thinking and it had permeated her being. But…

“Tomo,” said Mitotsudaira. “Focusing on others and doing things for others are not the same thing. My king would never choose the latter. Because he does not want to be a burden on others. So…”

“Yes…”

Asama kind of understood what she meant.

“He’s an entertainer god musician.”

Making others smile was not done for others.

When others smiled, it made him happy too.

He made others smile and they made him smile. That was not all, of course. He was a born entertainer who saw purpose in moving others to emotion.

Most entertainer god musicians were like that.

Asama did not worship an entertainer god, but as the #2 to the Asama Shrine, she had the appropriate knowledge and had seen it for herself.

Why did entertainers enjoy focusing on others?

She understood. Or she thought she did.

…I see.

She had seen this in “him” and his sister, “he” had done it to her, and she had sensed it there, so what if she placed that feeling on herself?

…I…

How did she focus on others?

“Unlike an entertainer, I’m not a pervert.”

“You just completely rejected Kimi-chan’s personality there, didn’t you?”

“And for the sake of argument, how exactly does a pervert focus on others?” asked Adele.

Asama thought on that for a bit and found an answer.

“They would focus on perverted acts that delight the other person and they would enjoy watching the other person’s reaction while they- ahhhhhhhhhhh! I didn’t say anything! I was only giving an answer for the sake of argument! So I’m safe! I’m safe!!”

“Uzy, you don’t have to help Hanami take readings.”

Asama felt like she was causing Hanami a lot of trouble recently. Those siblings had started doing a lot more now that they were 2nd years, but…

…The automaton at the Blue Thunder…

If “he” started going out with “her”…

…That is sure to be a lot of trouble for us…

Asama did not know what kind of person “she” was, but if “she” was anything like in the past, then “he” and “she” would often act as a pair while Asama and Kimi…

“Ah.”

“Heh heh. What is it?”

“Well, um,” responded Asama as she thought.

…That’s right.

Kimi had always been the “big sister”. She had been “his” and “her” big sister. Asama had been at that trio’s mercy, she had helped out “him” and “her”, she had gotten between them, and she had supported them.

“…”

Her focus on others had been built up there. And while it was partially due to her mother’s influence that she worshipped the Sakuya god…

…Sakuya is a mother god, but she has a lot of family and daily life support spells.

So how was it she focused on others?

“When I’m at a place like this, I must enjoy supporting others and supporting the place itself.”

But if that was how she focused on others…

“Does that mean I don’t have to worry about every little thing?”

When doing karaoke, she could help out by registering songs that kept the excitement going, she could agree to sing duets with the others, and she could give some help to anyone unsure if they were going to sing or not.

If she was hesitant to sing, she did not have to force herself.

…That's right.

At that point, Asama recalled the times when she had gone out for karaoke with the others. She had never forced herself to sing and the others had never forced her to do it either.

That had been plenty of fun and the others had not excluded her or "used" her when all she did was help out.

They had let her do what she could as much as she wanted.

…I was really lucky.

She had a place for herself and the others respected that.

Instead of trying to take control of what someone else could do, they all worked together to form a single whole.

And…

"Asama…-san. …Do you…understand?"

Asama finally realized why Suzu had brought up this topic.

That girl was blind, but even if the others helped her out, they did not steal the things she could do.

They only helped out when it was something she wanted to do but could not or that would take an excessive amount of time or effort.

And there were people who would help her.

"He" and "she" had always been that sort of person.

Was Asama also that sort of person to Suzu?

No, she could guess that they were all that sort of person to each other.

But while Asama did enjoy helping out others…

"Do I enjoy having others do it to me?"

"That is a statement well worth recording."

"Eh?"

Asama saw Naruze calmly saving some recorded data while bleeding from the nose.

“Ah. No! I wasn’t talking about that! I really wasn’t!”

“I’m making so much progress on my storyboard.”

“We need to talk about this, Naruze!”

“Calm down.” Kimi slapped Asama on the shoulder. “I also like doing it.”

So…

“We will assist you by doing the things that only we can and we can do the things you think you’ll enjoy. So how about telling us what you want to do? What is it you want to do but don’t think you can? If you want to try it out…”

Kimi smiled.

“Asama, we’ll join you. Because it sounds like fun.”

Mitotsudaira looked to Asama.

…What Tomo wants to do.

Out of habit, she almost interpreted that in a dirty way, but that was not what this was about. After all, Asama was normal…ish. She was relatively normal…as long as you did not compare her to Suzu.

…Ah, I think I’ve touched on something I should have avoided!

Asama simply lowered her gaze a little.

But unlike that morning…

“U-um.”

She was not taking this lightly. She had shown plenty of resolve in the morning and it had all gone to waste, but this was not going to waste because she was sending her willpower out directly.

The flush of her cheeks and hesitance of her body were not due to embarrassment.

She had grasped what was inside her, but it was far too large and she did not know how to bring it out.

Would her answer be rejected?

Would her answer be laughed at?

Would her answer get through to them?

And most importantly…

…Will she not regret this thought and what she wants to do?

The 2nd year was close enough to graduation that she had to think about how it would affect their future. Even if Asama had an almost guaranteed position in the future, things were different when a failure could involve others.

So Mitotsudaira spoke.

"Tomo." She was aware her eyebrows were raised in a smile. "We can do this. At the very least…the enjoyable memories will outweigh any regrets."

Mitotsudaira has really learned how to express herself, thought Naruze while catching her nosebleed in a bucket.

Before they entered high school but after they had all gathered together, she had been so obedient.

People really did change. Except in Mitotsudaira's case, she had changed while also returning to a better version of herself.

And so she could *say it.*

Of course, Naruze thought the details of Mitotsudaira's past were none of her business, but she also thought they were important to Mitotsudaira herself.

…If it's none of my business, it's weird to insist I won't touch on it.

She had no intention of criticizing Mitotsudaira's past. Naruze's view was that it had not harmed them any. So she would not criticize it, but there were times when she would mention that it had happened. For example…

"The flower bed here is a lot nicer than when you threw it at that upperclassman."

That had caused something of a commotion, but Mitotsudaira had not run away from it. At this point, she would probably just sigh and say, "That did happen, didn't it?"

But when Naruze looked at the gaze the silver wolf turned toward Asama, she realized it was the same as the one Asama and the others had given the wolf in the past.

…I need to redraw my storyboard.

She had planned to have the story progress by supporting their weaker points, but that was not convincing.

This was why her classmates were so difficult to work with.

"It's just too hard to rape them."

"Wh-where did that come from!?" exclaimed Mitotsudaira. "And why were you staring at me when you said it!?"

"Don't worry about it." Naruze turned toward Asama. "I agree about making sure you enjoy yourself. Instead of becoming a woman who spends all her time looking back in regret, I want to be a Technohexen who has a lot of time she can fondly look back on. What about you, Asama? If you want to do that, you can't be looking back all the time. That's nothing more than the pre-established harmony."

So…

"Tell us what you would enjoy doing."

Asama nodded.

…Let's see.

What would she enjoy doing?

"U-um, can I ask something?"

She asked before they could answer.

“If I’m enjoying it, would everyone else enjoy it too?”

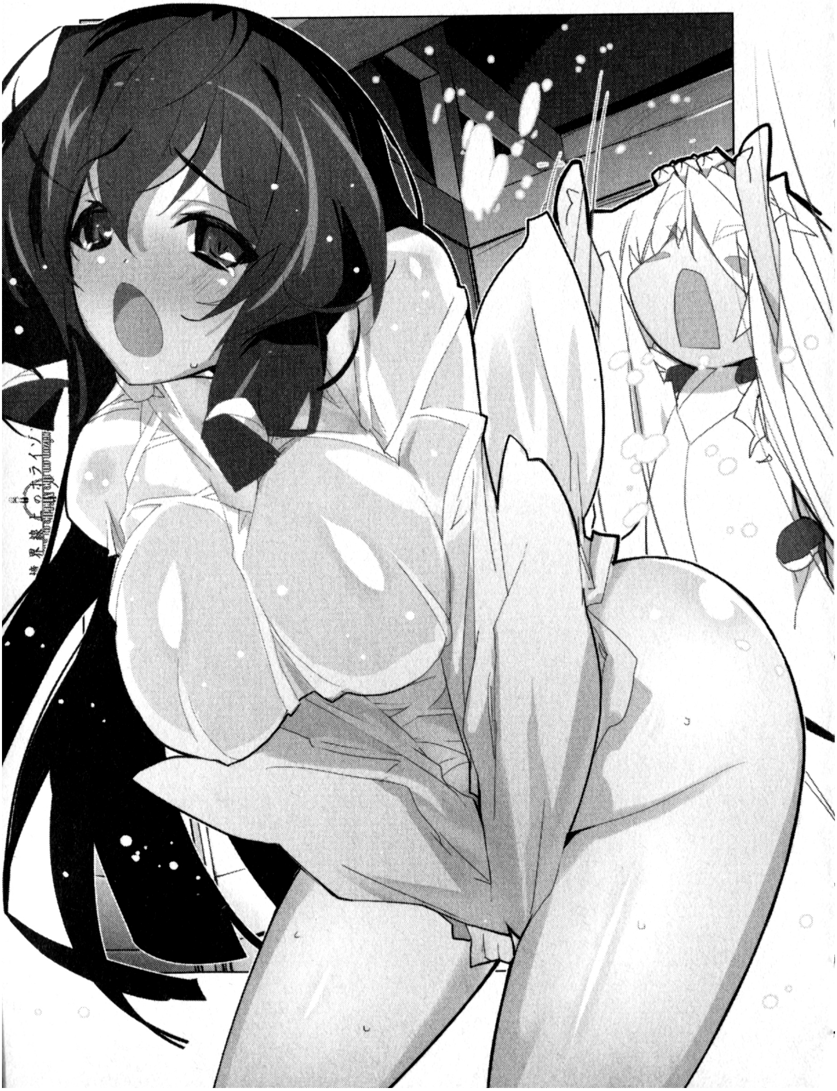
“Heh heh. What is it you might enjoy while the other person would find it unpleasant?”

Naruze wrote a 4-letter word starting with “r” on her Magie Figure, but everyone ignored her and Suzu tilted her head. As for Asama…

“What I would enjoy and everyone else would find boring…”

“Stop that, Tomo.”

“You’re thinking too much again.”


境界線上のホライゾン
Horizon on the Middle of Nowhere

Mitotsudaira and Kimi's warnings sounded kind to her and so she got careless.

A moment later, someone flipped up the bottom of her yukata like it was a skirt and someone dumped a bucket of warm water on her. The sensation of a warm purification and a prank was accompanied by a splashing sound, but…

"Eh?"

She felt a draft between her legs.

She was not wearing anything at all below the yukata and the yukata had gone see-through.

“Ohhh,” said Naito and Asama quickly held down the bottom of the yukata.

“No, h-hey…!”

Honestly, thought Mitotsudaira while blushing. *Her thoughts really are too rigid.*

A need to view everything as important was Asama’s strong point and weak point.

In a positive light, it made her a devoted girl. In a negative light, it made her a fussy girl.

Mitotsudaira knew nothing she said would fix this, but she could not let Asama wallow in it either. So…

“I did my best to provide the kind of shock therapy I think my king would use.”

“I’d rather you didn’t do your best there.”

Asama held down the front of the yukata and tried to pull the back down below her waist.

“H-huh…?”

Don’t tell me, thought Mitotsudaira.

“Is the wet cloth catching on your butt, so you can’t get it back down?”

“N-no, no! Th-there’s just a trick to it. …Ah, what is that look for, Adele?”

As they watched Asama, she finally released the waist hard point parts to loosen the yukata. Which meant…

“Heh heh heh. Asama, I see you’ve got a butt as nice as your boobs! Ah, what is that look for, Mitotsudaira?”

Everything felt unfair to Mitotsudaira, but this one had started with her. She felt like this was her just deserts in a bad way and she spoke up again.

"Tomo."

"Wh-what is it?"

Why is she pulling her hips back so defensively? And this pose has her breasts hang down in a way deserving of a sound effect, which feels unfair yet again.

But she had something to say to Asama.

"Don't get bogged down in worry. You're not used to any of this, so if you enjoy it, of course the rest of us will. Besides, aren't you always helping and supporting us at times like this? You can keep that as your foundation. And if you don't…"

If she was going to let her worries hold her back when she was normally *like that*, then…

"I know just what my king would say: This isn't like you at all."

…*Oh, she might be right…*

Asama realized that everyone understood her situation here.

"Asama-chi, you're too self-conscious. Way too self-conscious."

Naito smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered and waved her hand back and forth.

"But," she continued. "If you sing and mess up, don't worry about it. There are times when you think 'Oh, I messed that up' in everyday conversation, right? It even happens between Ga-chan and me. …Right?"

"Judge. Margot has such an objective view of *shudo* that we sometimes can't see eye-to-…that isn't what you meant? This isn't about that? Yes, I can tell even when you don't say a word, Margot."

Oh, I know.

"Margot likes to listen to idol songs, but I just don't see the appeal."

"That's a lot different from your first try!!"

"Now, now." Naruze waved a hand dismissively and then looked at them all in turn. "There are only 7 of us here now, but those little differences still show up all the time. So there's no point in worrying over them for either party involved. For example…does anyone here like coffee milk?"

Naito, Naruze, Asama, and Kimi raised their hands.

"Yes, yes." Kimi nodded. "I especially like it black."

"Then that isn't coffee milk!"

But Adele, Mitotsudaira, and Suzu all had their own views:

"I prefer tea milk."

"I like it straight."

"I-I've…recently grown fond of…matcha milk."

"You like it bitter!" said everyone as they turned to Suzu, but then Adele spoke up.

"Um, aren't we getting off topic?"

"So we are." Naruze nodded as everyone turned back her way. "And just when Asama was having an important conversation. You people are terrible."

"You were the one that got us off topic, weren't you!? You were, weren't you!?"

"No, I wasn't getting us off topic. I was planning to ask you all this: What do you do when you get some coffee milk?"

"Ah."

Suzu ran skillfully along the wet floor and returned almost immediately.

"Here."

She brought in a basket of coffee milk bottles from the changing room. The heavy glass clanked together as she moved.

“This is your…order from before.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Everyone accepted a bottle as if to lighten the load for Suzu. As Asama watched, Naito shouted “ohhh!” and Naruze checked the brand name and ingredients label. Kimi was measuring the bottle’s opening with her fingers, but…

…Oh. Is this what Naruze was talking about?

For example, Adele had said she preferred tea milk, but…

“Oh, this is great. It reminds me of the lunches from elementary school.”

“Um, Adele? How long has it been since you had this?”

As Asama accepted a bottle from Suzu too, she realized that Adele and Mitotsudaira had said coffee milk was not their favorite, and yet…

…They don’t look displeased.

Instead, they were clearly enjoying the coffee milk.

…So even if it isn’t #1 for them, they aren’t going to reject it.

She realized it was the same for her. There were a lot of things she liked. In some cases, she liked her #1 choice because it was so valuable, so she more often relied on her #2 choice. And she was not talking about sake there. Surely not.

But in that case…

“There might not be very many things that are actually a nuisance.”

“If you say what you want – heh heh – are you afraid people won’t like the Asama Shrine?”

Now that you mention it, maybe I am, thought Asama as she took a sip from the bottle.

…But there’s not really anything you can do if some people don’t like you.

That was true. There were some people who would shun her even if she did everything right.

And if she could enjoy her #2, #3, and even lower choices…

…I don’t have to force myself to like anything.

So what would she do now?

“Yes…”

She brought the bottle to her lips again so her thoughts would not escape her mouth. She took a drink just as Kimi used her fingers to measure the thick bottle opening.

“When I drink these at home, my foolish brother sticks his God Mosaic into it and says, ‘Look, Sis! I’m fishing!’ ”

Asama and Mitotsudaira both spat out their milk.

Mitotsudaira wiped off her mouth and saw Adele giving Kimi a sharp look.

The small vassal spoke in a large voice.

“Stop that, Kimi-san! It makes it hard to drink this! Wait until I’m done drinking for that kind of joke!”

Kimi looked to Adele and gave her a silent smile.

“__________”

She turned the bottle upside-down to chug her own milk as quickly as she could.

It took only 3 seconds for Kimi to gulp it down. She let out a breath, delicately held the bottle, thoroughly licked off the opening, and made sure to catch every last drop on her tongue.

After all that, she looked back to Adele.

“Heh heh. It’s really good. Aren’t you going to drink yours?”

“Damn you and your adult flavor!!”

“Ga-chan! Ga-chan! You don’t need to start measuring the size! It is pretty thick, but you need to calm down and stop calling it reference material!”

I think we all need to calm down here.

But anyway, thought Mitotsudaira as she saw Asama’s half-full bottle and exchanged a glance with her. Then they both said the same thing.

“If it was Horizon…”

They looked up in surprise. Mitotsudaira looked Asama in the eye and then looked around at the others, but no one else had heard them say that. Suzu was tilting her head while focusing on the movements of Naruze’s hands and Kimi was rubbing Adele’s head.

And so Mitotsudaira spoke to Asama.

“If it was her, she would hit the ‘caught’ bottle with a hammer.”

“She might smash it between her hands instead.”

“Perhaps so,” said Mitotsudaira as she and Asama nodded at each other, but they were probably thinking this because of that automaton at the Blue Thunder.

…*That automaton…*

That’s an issue for later, decided Mitotsudaira. When she had heard that her king was trying to win over another girl that morning, she had thought he might have forgotten his relationship with her and she had grown angry, but now that she had seen who that girl was, most of her worry had faded.

She was not “her” knight. Her master was her *king*.

If her king did something, her anger might reignite, but she already had her king/knight relationship with him and “she” would not intrude on *that.*

So she was not worried.

…*Judge.*

She allowed herself to think back on a time so far in the past that the memories were more nostalgic than enjoyable.

And she realized that her king was not trying to continue or redo those times. He was probably trying to begin something new.

After all, she knew he was someone who chose to face forward. He would not return to the past even if he was still dragging it around. That was why she had chosen to participate in her king's dream.

Forward.

This was probably something new, like when she had received her king and begun her new life.

So *this* was a dividing line for him.

This new beginning was a dividing line from 10 years ago. So…

"________"

Mitotsudaira realized something.

…Have we reached a major turning point?

Not just me, but everyone, including my king.

That was probably just what the second year of high school was.

The Apocalypse was the major topic of discussion in the world and people's environments, situations, and relationships were changing in response to that.

She had to wonder if the movements in response to the changing world were beginning to affect them too.

And if "she" was here…

…Will my king move too?

She did not know when that would happen. He did not bring that side of himself to the surface often and, even if he was watching her, he could be such a mess that it was difficult to keep an eye on him for long.

So for now, thought Mitotsudaira.

"Tomo."

Someone here was hoping to change.

This was not like her king who had yet to settle on a goal and it was not like the trends of the world. This person was already the representative of Musashi's Shinto and she already kept the world moving.

Mitotsudaira herself was 2nd in line to ruling the Far East, so she understood what that was like.

"I too am always hoping to change. So…"

So she spoke her thoughts on the changing world, including the changes to her king.

"Let's try to enjoy this. …What is it you want to do?"

Asama could tell everyone's eyes were on her.

She breathed in and spoke clearly.

"Kimi, Mito."

This was only continuing what she had started that morning, but…

"Will you create a band with me?"

"Okay, time to score today's date!!"

"Ehhhhhh!? Isn't this where you're supposed to give an emotional answer!?"

The idiot sister was not listening. She pulled a drawing board from somewhere and wrote on it with an oil calligraphy pen.

"Okay, your scores were boobs, boobs, boobs, and boob. Oh, that last one is scoring you pretty harshly! I bet that's just an ass-lover's passion speaking, but let's not forget Mitotsudaira flipping up your yukata! Right!? Ding! (Score sound) And it's in! It's in! Peh-peh-leh-peh-peh-peh-peh-peh-peh-peh-peh!"

The idiot sister spun around and pointed both index fingers at Asama.

"You scored 'boobs' across the board!!"

"Just tell me how the date was."

"To be blunt, that would be really hard to score. For one thing, weren't there way too many events?"

That was true enough, but Asama was pretty sure none of those were her responsibility. So…

"Those were what they call *force majeure*."

"Oh, fine then."

Kimi pulled a sign frame from her cleavage and tossed it to Asama and Mitotsudaira.

Eh?" thought Asama as she caught it and saw a series of words.

…*What is this?*

"Um, Kimi?"

"While fighting the Hidden Dragons, I started up Turning Point and wrote a song. …It's incomplete, though."

"I understand," said Mitotsudaira. "I don't really have what it takes to perform music either."

"Eh? W-wait, you two."

Could they not do it?

Because they could not complete a song or lacked what it took to perform music? But…

"Was the date a failure?"

"Silly girl."

Kimi narrowed her eyes and asked her a question instead.

"Was the date fun?"

Asama thought about that. A lot had happened, but she had been surprised by Mitotsudaira's song and Naito and Naruze's song. It was the kind of day that she would never want to forget even if she sighed whenever she did remember it.

So…

“Yes. It was fun.”

“Then let’s have even more fun.”

Kimi opened a sign frame identical to the one Asama held.

“This song really is hopelessly incomplete. After all…”

After all…

“It needs 3 people to sing it, so it’s incomplete if I’m going to perform it myself.”

“That’s right,” said Mitotsudaira.

Asama saw the silver wolf give her a smile.

“And I don’t have a good instrument on hand. Didn’t I ask you to let me see the instruments at the Asama Shrine? …You have some, don’t you?”

“Eh?”

Asama looked to Kimi and Mitotsudaira. She could tell she was staring and she had a feeling all of her emotions were showing on her face, so…

“Yes…”

She nodded once, but then…

“…!”

She nodded a second and third time. And then she fixed her disheveled bangs.

“Wait.”

She reached one hand out toward Kimi and the other toward Mitotsudaira.

She took their hands and pulled them in close.

“I forgot to do this during the date.”

She wrapped her arms around theirs.

Mitotsudaira realized Kimi was looking her way.

And then Kimi grabbed her empty arm.

She held it back.

Now the three of them formed a small scrum.

They pressed their foreheads together and Kimi spoke first.

“Heh heh. We may have been born on different days, but we discussed my foolish brother’s dick on the same day!!”

“How can you talk about that while drinking milk, Kimi-san!?”

Those outside the scrum were enjoyably noisy.

But Asama…

“Heh.”

Musashi’s shrine maiden relaxed her body and laughed. After the first laugh, she could not stop and her shoulders shook.

“Ah ha ha…”

“What is it, Asama? What a weird girl.”

“Yeah,” Asama nodded. She nodded again and again and something fell from the eyes partially hidden by her bangs.

…*Tomo.*

Let’s just say that’s sweat or steam from the bath, decided Mitotsudaira. Either way it was not hers.

But Mitotsudaira understood.

She had been the same.

She had once tried to change and failed. She had gone in a bad direction and lost sight of what the right direction even was.

Asama had to be the same.

Her future was already decided and she had a role for herself, so there was no point in her changing. In fact, change would be dangerous in her position.

But wasn't possibility a good thing for them?

…No, it isn't just that.

No one could deny an individual of their possibilities. Unless that person threw them out themselves.

Mitotsudaira had nearly thrown hers out because she thought she would never have an opportunity for that again.

Asama had never even considered hers because they seemed unnecessary for her.

Mitotsudaira had had a king who had not let her throw hers out and had helped her hold onto them.

It was probably the same for Asama. So…

"Tomo."

She felt they had just accepted their friend's possibilities.

Just like her king had once done for her.

Since she could do this, she must be looking in the same direction as her king. So…

"We're going to have a lot of fun."

After all…

"We need to practice for about a week to reach for this new thing. We need to do our best while we work together and listen to everyone's assessment of us."

"That's…right."

Asama nodded and looked up. Even as another girl, Mitotsudaira thought her damp eyes were attractive. And combined with the somewhat flushed cheeks and smile…

"Heh heh. What's this? You look like you just became an adult."

“No, that’s not what I-…”

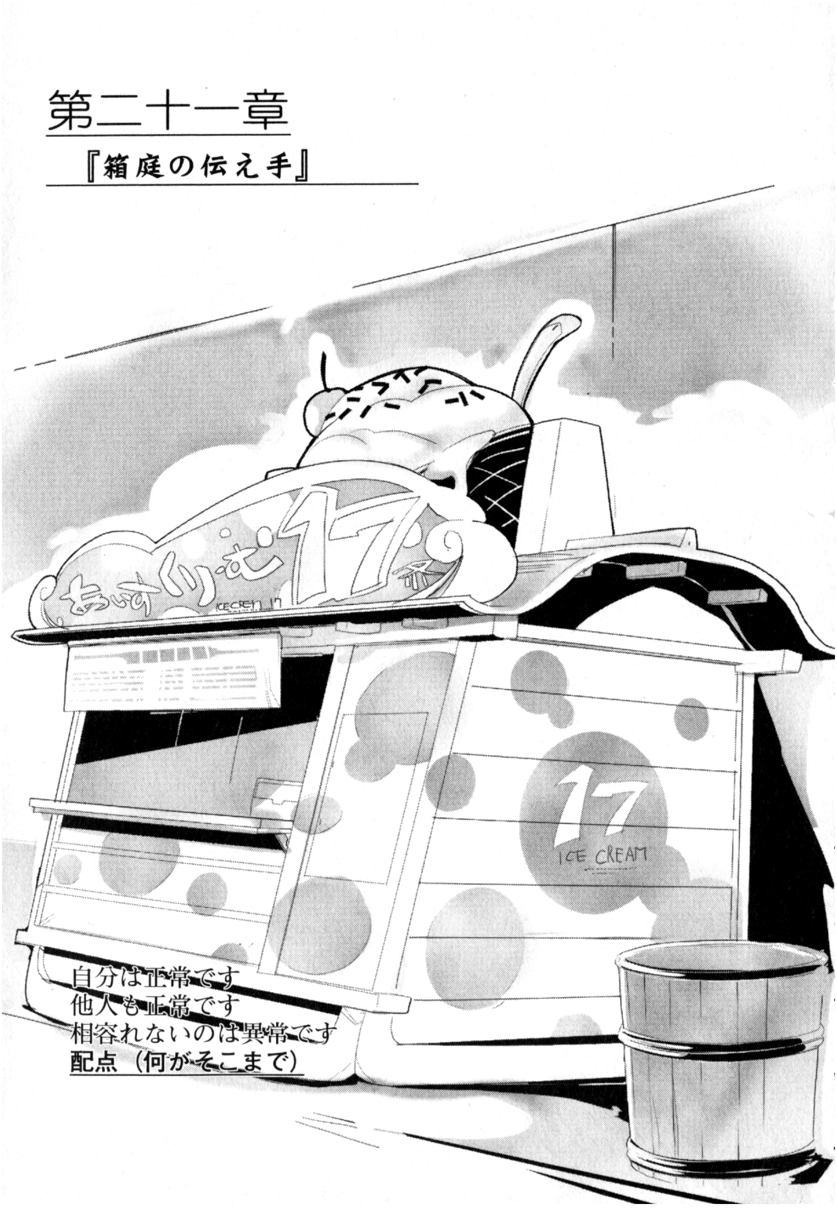
But Asama did not stop smiling and she said something else instead.

“Thank you.”

She did not bow. Her smile simply grew.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done and for everything I’m sure you’ll do in the future.”

Chapter 21: Helper in a Miniature Garden


第二十一章
『箱庭の伝え手』
あいすくりーむ17
ICECREAM 17
17
ICE CREAM
自分は正常です
他人も正常です
相容れないのは異常です
配点（何がそこまで）

I am normal

Others are also normal

That we can’t get along is abnormal

Point Allocation (Why that much?)

"Manager."

It was night in a park surrounded by atrium walls and with a rectangular slice of the heavens visible overhead.

Two people were dismantling the ice cream stand at the bottom of it.

The taller of the two asked a question of the fatter of the two.

"Manager, have you made arrangements for when I quit after the summer school festival a week from now?"

"Yes, Oosuga-san, I've found someone to take your place, so don't worry. The Ohiroshiki name has a lot of pull. I'll make sure to expand the business so your efforts building up the foundation here won't go to waste."

"Judge," said Oosuga with a hand on a column. He looked to the other boy with narrowed eyes. "You're considerate, you know how to conduct yourself, and you're a good person deep down. …If only being a lolicon didn't negate all of that."

"Now, now." Ohiroshiki smiled while folding up the roof. "You never lose sight of the details, you're generous, and you're incredibly inclusive. …If only loving wives didn't negate all of that."

Silence fell between them for 3 seconds, but then Oosuga resumed speaking.

"It's strange. …We're so clearly the worst of enemies, but we sometimes get along like this."

"Judge. That's right. …Who could have predicted that our work efficiency would be greatest when a wife arrives with her little girl in tow?"

"To be honest, I started working here because the guards asked me to investigate a criminal."

"Ho ho? Did you not notice the mirror in the locker on your first day working here?"

“Is that what that was? …Did someone leak my information?”

“Yes, Watanabe-san came by for a greeting ahead of time and said, ‘If you do anything weird, you’ll be arrested right away, so be careful. And if Oosuga-san does anything weird, please report it.’ And we certainly can’t have the heir of the Ohiroshiki family getting arrested as a lolicon. Besides, I am not a lolicon! I am a life worshiper! That’s nothing like you and your wife fetish!"

“Any man who makes excuses for his genre is destined for hell.”

“Don’t be so certain of that!” Ohiroshiki pulled in the cloth-covering for the stand’s roof. “But Watanabe-san isn’t a wife.”

“She will be if I marry her.”

“Our weird half-dragon once made a similar argument. He said, ‘Nhh, a May birthday means there’s only 1 month available for girls in the same year’ while he drew up all sorts of charts.”

“It is important to put an effort into your genre.”

“Ho ho? You’ve put an effort into yours, Oosuga-san?”

“I plan to.” Oosuga sighed. “After graduation, I will travel the mainland with Watanabe in search of a master, but after ‘about one circuit’ I think we can get married if we both agree. …What is that odd look for?”

“I just can’t figure out why you want that kind of fixed position so badly.”

“Maybe it is strange,” agreed Oosuga, but he had more to say while removing the latch on a column. “But a fixed position is something you decide on for yourself.”

“Are you saying you won’t have a fixed position even after getting married? Are you going to cheat on her?”

“That isn’t what I meant. Although it is one possible change,” said Oosuga. “For example, whenever you grow to love someone or to hate someone, the world before that and after that is different. If possible, I want that to be a good difference.”

“How were things after meeting me?”

“I’d like to think I regret that because it was a bad difference. For as we stand in the darkness betwixt these walls that veil the night sky…”

“Could you stop getting all poetic at the end like that? But…”

Ohiroshiki lowered the cloth from the roof and spread it out on the ground. When Oosuga asked if he wanted help, he shook his head. And…

“Are you saying what you hold in your heart can change the world around you?”

“Things can sometimes give us an extra push. When you buy new clothes or something else with which to express yourself, you can put on airs around town and others might treat you differently. At the very least, your point of view will change. That can be a problem when you seek objectivity, though. But…”

This time, Oosuga’s words pointed to the opposite meaning.

“If you can be changed by small changes, then enlarging yourself by gaining many of those ‘fixed positions’ you mentioned is not actually stagnation. You would instead be gaining possibilities for change.”

So…

“A variety of ‘fixed positions’ – that is, companions, roles, money, and things – do not fix yourself in place. If you think of them as your own possibilities, the ‘small changes’ you find before your eyes will become the entrances to a great number of ‘different worlds’.”

“Is Watanabe-san a ‘thing’?”

“If I thought of her as a wedge that fixes me in place, then she would be. There is no movement there, after all.”

But…

“If everything she has and everything I have can become possibilities for the other, then she is not. …If we both sense the same small changes in each other, then *the world will change* at twice the speed and frequency. And for that, I am willing to drink sake from the same cup as her.”

“Are you trying to get me to give a little girl sake so you can arrest me?”

Just as he said that, Ohiroshiki looked up and toward the stairway to the park.

“Oh, Tenzou-kun. What are you doing here? There are no little girls around.”

“No, um, I like busty blondes.”

The ninja raised a hand below a light and Ohiroshiki exchanged a glance with Oosuga.

“Did you hear that, Oosuga-san?”

“Being a busty blonde is not a requirement for a wife, but there are busty blonde wives. …Little girls are out of the question.”

Oosuga then spoke to the ninja.

“We might be able to be friends.”

“…”

“Why the silence?”

The ninja turned toward Ohiroshiki.

“Ohiroshiki-dono, the 1st Special Duty Officer said to contact her if you need to be arrested.”

“I-I’m innocent! I am a life worshiper! This wife-lover next to me is the problem!”

“This is not some creepy fetish. It is a hobby!”

“Ah.” Ohiroshiki turned toward Oosuga. “I thought you said you wouldn’t make excuses! You filthy person!!”

“Yeah, but Watanabe can’t take a joke.”

The ninja sighed and scratched his head, so Oosuga asked him a question while removing the eave boards that had formed the roof.

“Do you work under the Chancellor’s Officers?”

“I belong to Musashi’s Ninja Union.”

“Oh, you’re Crossunite-sensei’s son.”

“Judge. Sorry about my father.”

“No, no.” Oosuga shook his head. “When he didn’t show up for our drills the other day, I just assumed he had gotten arrested again, but I certainly never thought he had ended up in the hospital after chugging some eye drops for an illusion technique.”

“At the hospital, he was saying something about ‘I felt like I was so close to seeing something amazing, but I ended up going too far’, but…well, he is my father, so I hope you won’t fire him.”

However…

“Watanabe-dono had a message for you: ‘When you are done cleaning up, let’s grab a bite to eat at the academy’.”

“Food, hm? If Torii and the others will be there too, we’ll probably discuss the Gagaku Festival.”

“Judge. That’s what she said. Sounds like everyone is going to be busy.”

Tenzou turned to the back and port to face Okutama.

“I passed by an engine division worker from our class and she said they’re holding a karaoke party since some of our girls are going to be performing.”

I have a decent grasp of how it sounds, thought Asama to calm herself.

She was studying the song Kimi had made for the 3 of them.

The music was simple enough. The lyrics were composed of some girls’ talk including all of their speech patterns, so it was obvious Kimi had written it with Asama and Mitotsudaira in mind. She probably only had to focus on singing.

Naomasa had just arrived and Asama expected her to complain that she could not use the bath today, but…

“That’s about what I expected.”

“Then did you come here because you were worried, Nao-san?”

Adele asked with a smile, but Naomasa did not respond. The look on her face only said "who knows".

"I washed myself off over there, so I'm fine. For now, I'll sing a song."

From there, she began passionately singing. It was Screw Thread, the engine division's variation of the Musashi Song.

"The uuuuuuselesssss will beeeee burrrrrned at the staaaaaake!"

Is that really something to sing so loudly? wondered Asama, but she also worked to memorize the lyrics.

…*Yes.*

The process she was going through now was one she was sure to go through again a few more times.

Each performer in the Gagaku Festival performed 3 songs. If this was the 1st, then there would still be 2 more.

She did not find this a daunting task. After all, she went through the same process for the Asama Shrine's Gagaku. But there was no sheet music for Shinto Gagaku. It was all passed down orally and she would learn what "sounded good" by watching and listening to a predecessor.

There were a lot of videos and records for reference, so she had plenty of examples. Some examples were especially amazing, so she had enjoyed watching them with Kimi and the others who stopped by to help:

"Look! The worshiper from this year got so excited she started playing it with her teeth!"

"Are you really allowed to start shouting and smashing the instrument against the ground like this?"

"I have to ask: what's with this one in Kumadori makeup and spikes on the shoulders?"

She started to realize that Shinto really took an "anything goes" stance on things, but she also thought that had helped expand the breadth and depth of her skills. By comparing the melody lines and lyrics of the song Kimi had written, she could grasp most of it. And then she turned toward Mitotsudaira.

“Mito, this part is you, right?”

“Eh? Oh, then this must be you, Tomo, and then this would be Kimi.”

Asama was so happy that they could understand each other so well.

…I see.

It was a lot like when she spoke with Kimi or him about cooking. But she had never been able to talk like this about anything she would be doing with her friends.

The ability to do that felt like a major change, but…

…Yes.

This was something that had not been inside her heart until recently.

So, she thought. *I need to take good care of it. This is something I’m allowed to take good care of.*

A non-Shinto version of herself had been born recently and it was with her now.

Her Shinto self still remained, but this new self was also here and interacting with the others. So…

“Asama-chi, are you ready?”

She looked up when someone spoke to her unexpectedly.

Kimi saw Asama start to say something to Naomasa.

There was no intent to back off in Asama’s face. Kimi could tell it was a look of “I can do this”. But…

“Umm.”

She looked to Kimi and then some panicked words spilled from her lips.

“Kimi…and Mito. Are you two ready?”

“Naomasa was asking you.”

“Eh?” Asama looked confused, but she soon calmed her breathing. “I am ready.”

“Then so am I. Mitotsudaira?”

“I-I’ve learned my part, so I’m ready.”

“Then,” said Kimi while activating Turning Point with a step. “Asama, I’m feeling pretty fired up.”

“Oh, no,” replied Asama while opening a thermometer spell sign frame. “Kimi, I’ll stick this in your armpit to check for a fever, so please raise your arm.”

“Tomo! Tomo! You’re more panicked than you’re letting on, aren’t you!?”

“Eh? Eh?”

Asama was utterly perplexed, so Kimi snatched the sign frame from her, stuck the left end between Asama’s breasts, and stuck the right end between her own.

“Okay, time to take our temperatures. …Don’t give me that look, Mitotsudaira. I’ll take yours afterwards, so stick your butt out this way.”

“I will do nothing of the sort!!”

The result said Asama’s temperature was somewhat elevated, but some tension was a good thing for a beginner.

“Then let’s get started. Asama, give us the starting signal. …Just like always.”

“Eh? Oh, right!”

Asama turned toward the others and clapped her hands together.

“…Music!”

This was probably something like a conditioned reflex, but since Mitotsudaira was smiling bitterly next to her, it had to be the right thing to do. As the intro synth pad matched the image of the wind floating high in the sky, Kimi increased Turning Point's volume.

It began.

When her part began, Asama did not hesitate to sing the second bar that followed Kimi's. “It's always so sudden with you,” she sang, and Kimi responded with “Don't act like you aren't capricious too.”

Kimi had said the lyrics were still tentative and the music was still rough around the edges.

But when she asked “Where are you?” and Mito sang “Now, let's plan our date” in response, she grasped the main point. This was a song about not being alone.

“I said listen.”

That admonishment and everything else only existed because she had a friend who supported her changes, watched her, and would show her their own changes.

She had another friend like that.

“Come on, you two. I am a beginner. But I will do my best to escort you.”

Everyone was watching, so they sang in unison.

“Together with you today.”

As they sang their parts back and forth, Asama thought.

“Why are you so onboard with this?”

…Yes, it really is simple to get onboard with this kind of thing. I've started doing it myself.

“Yes, yes. Is that so?”

With self-deprecation and expectation, Asama realized that she could smile bitterly and say “how strange” when she saw the constant changes to her surroundings, the world, this nation, the adults, and her friends, but within all that upheaval, she could also casually and proactively jump in and say, “Now, let's prepare for the date.”

“Yes, where is that? I will escort you there.”

She no longer had to decide who she was. So she could sing, “Let’s enjoy this.”

“Now, I’d like one date to go.”

Always.

“C’mon. Isn’t it hard to walk this close together?”

She could always be this close to them.

“Leave it to me.”

And with that, she sang, “Now for the climax of the date.”

“The heat won’t die down.”

It really would not.

“Are you saying that again? Surely you understand by now.”

Yes, she did understand. It would always be like this.

“…Always until morning.”

Everyone sang a few more songs, but a comment from Adele had caused a problem.

“What’s your band name?”

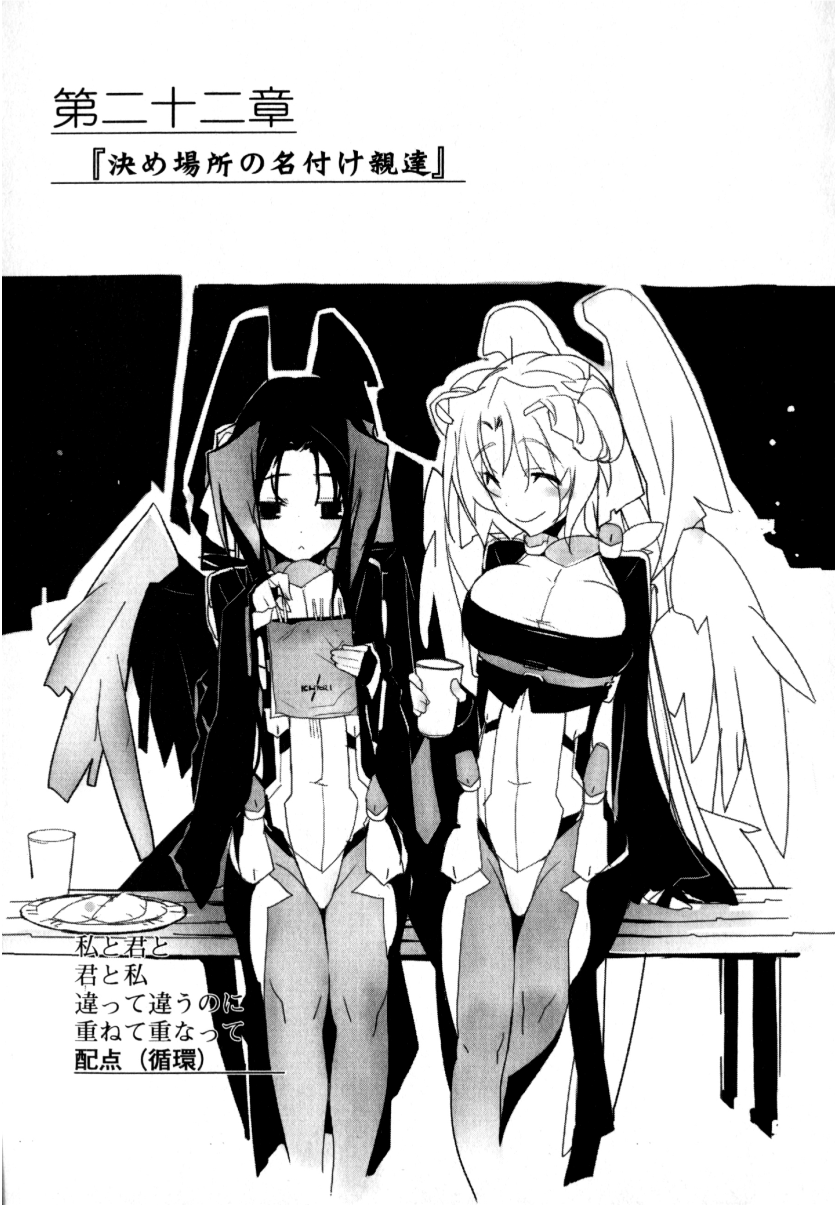
Panicking, Asama looked down at the sign frame form and noticed the deadline was “tonight”.

Kimi and Mitotsudaira decided to spend the night at Asama’s place.

And Kimi expressed her thoughts on the matter.

“It really is going to be like this until morning, isn’t it?”

Chapter 22: Namers of a Decisive Place


第二十二章
『決め場所の名付け親達』
私と君と
君と私
違って違うのに
重ねて重なって
配点（循環）

Me and you

You and me

We’re different

Yet we come together

Point Allocation (Circulation)

There was a fair amount of foot traffic in a nighttime long block.

Even though the residential and student districts were closed for the night, the transportation districts were preparing for after dawn and some businesses were busy throughout the night.

Cargo and people occasionally traveled down the underground Okutama long block. Suzu's student bathhouse was there and there was a plaza in a square depression in front of it. The plaza used the floor of the movable barrier to an elevator lift that was not in use.

Two people were there: Naito and Naruze.

They sat on a bamboo bench bordering the plaza and they were drinking the paper cups of juice they had bought at a nearby vending machine, and…

"Sigh, too bad it's too late to get some yakiniku, Ga-chan."

"Don't worry. That café's yakitori stand gave us some food for free. …We should have eaten more at the Blue Thunder before going to Suzu's bathhouse, though."

The two of them grabbed the bamboo skewers of chicken from the paper bag and then ate the pizza sitting next to them.

The pizza was also from a café stand. It was known as a white pizza, so it used garlic sauce instead of tomato sauce and it did not use much cheese. After being cooked, it had lots of vegetables placed on top and then it was rolled up.

Maybe we didn't need the chicken and garlic skewers, thought Naruze.

"Being delivery workers sure is convenient at times like this. We can move around at night and people give us discounts on food."

"You're right. But I kind of messed up at that pizza stand we heard was so good. I really wish I'd gotten one with tomato sauce."

"There's no helping that." Naruze smiled a little. "We're near Aki and K.P.A. Italia. Tomatoes are still a New World thing, so when we're right next to the lead nation of the Catholics who are so anal about the history recreation, the shops are going to go along with that."

"How naïve," said a sudden woman's voice.

And it was from right in front of them.

A woman holding a paper bag stood where no one had been a moment before.

She had wings. She was a 4-winged fallen angel. She gave them a somewhat examining look and Naruze looked up and called her name.

"Marine. …What's this? Are you working?"

Naito saw Marine shake her head at Naruze's question.

She looked to them and held up a rolled up pizza.

"I was, um, checking on today's records at my favorite restaurant."

She sounded hesitant and the pizza she held up was red. It used tomato sauce.

…Is that a special service for regulars?

Marine looked at what they held, shook her long chestnut hair, and tilted her head.

"Aren't you two eating too much? Are you okay?"

"Some of us aren't old ladies with a slowing metabolism."

Naito appreciated that Naruze's attitude never changed and so she asked a question of her own.

"Do you need something?"

"Y-yes," said Marine as she looked up.

She smiled and seemed to be happy that she had their interest.

"W-will you fight me, Zwei Fräulein?"

“Why?” Naruze immediately added to her question. “We’re ranked below you. We’re #3. Since you’re #2, shouldn’t you be going after Wild Kamelie above you? So why would you target us instead? Y-you’re so mean… Sob, sob. Margot, she’s bullying us. She’s bullying us because we’re the new girls…”

“There, there, Ga-chan. You can cry into my boobs.”

It was incredible how readily she pretended to cry and clung to Naito.

Meanwhile, Marine completely fell for the fake crying.

“U-um, n-no, that wasn’t what I-…”

She would get taken advantage of so badly if she ran across Heidi, thought Naito as Naruze started to press her face into her chest. But…

“Hey, Ga-chan, you had sauce on your mouth before, so did you wipe that off?”

Naruze blushed.

“Well…”

She looked up with her eyes closed, so Naito lowered her own head with both resignation (“Fine, then”) and joy (“Ohhh!”) in her heart.

Naito used her lips and tongue to clean off Naruze’s lips.

“Wow, Ga-chan. You’re really sticky and garlicky.”

“Heh heh. That actually rhymes.”

“Um…”

“Oh, Marine, you’re still here?”

“Judge,” she nodded while placing her feet on the plaza floor. She had been floating until then and that was just a normal action for her.

…She’s undergone quite a lot of training, hasn’t she?

For the winged races, the moment of takeoff was the most dangerous. They would spread their wings to build up wind, but the force of that would push them back and they would have to hold their ground.

…So you can't move.

There were several tricks to freeing them from that motionlessness, but takeoff was still dangerous.

So once they took off, they would keep the wind in their wings and avoid landing for as long as possible.

That was a lot easier said than done and official training was needed to teach their body how to do it on a subconscious level.

…The #2 spot must be a lot of work.

As Naito thought that and looked her way, Marine spoke.

"I have a clear reason for this fight: Revenge for Almirante…"

"No," immediately answered Naruze while pulling chicken skin on a skewer from the bag.

"What kind would you like?"

"Eh? I-I don't eat chicken."

"What a hopeless woman." Naruze wrinkled her brow. "Listen. We get to choose if we want to fight or not, but we won't let you have your revenge either way. Because we'll be the ones to beat you."

"Are you serious?"

Naruze did not answer that. She only gave the woman a sharp look.

Marine opened her mouth to say something, but…

"————"

She stopped, took a breath, and gathered strength in her shoulders once more.

Then she gave them a smile and spoke.

"Then I hope you'll put in a good day's work tomorrow as well."

With that, she vanished. She had used the acceleration of her 4 wings, but…

…She can vanish without producing any noise or wind? How much skill does that take?

Naito’s shoulders drooped as she realized this was one more problem for them to deal with.

“We still have a problem left, don’t we?”

Inside a tatami-floored room, two futons were arranged facing a single futon.

This was Asama’s room inside the Asama Shrine. Three girls lay on the futons, two of which had been brought in for the guests. One of the girls was Kimi who had removed the ribbons from her hair.

“Then how about this? The Giant-Flat-Giants.”

“Rejected! Immediately rejected!” responded Mitotsudaira with a sign frame that already had several ideas jotted down. She raised her eyebrows. “Besides, that would put me in the center, wouldn’t it?”

“Eh!? You’re aware how flat you are!? How wonderful, Mitotsudaira! As a knight, you are truly a picture of flatvalry! I hope spending the night in the Lewd Asama Shrine will give you some dirty dreams in which your king rubs your throat and belly and then lets you mark him!”

“I will dream nothing of the sort!!”

“Now, now.” Asama looked at the ideas she had written on her own sign frame using handwriting conversion. “Coming up with a band name is not easy.”

“Stumped already?”

Asama had to agree with Kimi’s question.

Back in Suzu’s bathhouse, everything had felt like it was going to work out, but…

…I never thought we'd be stumped at coming up with a name!

It was hard because of how different the 3 of them were. For example…

“Should we go for something in all kanji?”

“Wouldn't that be a little off from Mitotsudaira's image?”

“Sorry. And since I'm from Hexagone Française, English wouldn't really work either…”

That said, French was hard to understand and didn't seem to fit Asama's image.

…But what is my image?

She tried asking.

“What exactly is my image?

“Well, a shrine maiden, black hair…and size. Yes, incredible size. That part's important.”

“Oh?”

“K-Kimi, go easy on her. Tomo is a shrine maiden, black hair…”

Mitotsudaira looked back to where Asama lay on the futon. She looked between the futon and the girl's body.

“…And incredible size.”

“That settles it! Our band name is The Leader of Incredible Size and Her Partners!”

“Um,” cut in Mitotsudaira. “I'd really rather not just be a ‘partner’.”

Like that, nothing seemed to fit them all.

In the bathhouse, Asama had learned this did not need to be her first choice, but this was not a choice between her and others; it was a collective choice by the band.

And when she thought about it…

“Doesn't the word ‘band’ come from the idea of ‘banding together’?”

"Then we'll be the Giant Band!"

"Can we please get our mind off of breasts!?"

Asama agreed with Mitotsudaira on that one. But Kimi…

"What are you two talking about!? If it makes people laugh, we win!"

"Please spare me your insane logic."

At any rate, she decided it might be best to combine their images together. Just by lining them up, they could bring out the individuality of all 3 of them.

"Then let's try stating our image of the person next to us. Kimi will do Mito, Mito will do me, and I will do Kimi."

"Heh heh. I see how you kept yourself safe there. But it's not a bad idea. …Let's do this."

Asama saw Kimi describe Mitotsudaira with a serious look on her face.

"Canine."

Mitotsudaira's eyebrows rose slightly and she opened her mouth while facing Kimi, but Kimi…

"You're supposed to do Asama, remember?"

"O-oh, that's right."

Mitotsudaira's brow remained somewhat wrinkled as she turned to Asama.

"…Cushion."

Taking Mitotsudaira's current emotional state into account, she had clearly held back a lot. So Asama glared at Kimi and spoke on Mitotsudaira's behalf.

"…Crazy person."

Everyone hung their heads for 5 seconds until Kimi broke the silence.

“Since Asama goes in the center, our band name will be Crazy Cushion Canine!”

“The alliteration is kind of cute, but I’m not sure that would work.”

“No!” protested Mitotsudaira. “It most certainly would not work!”

“Then,” said Kimi. “Let’s reverse the order and start with Mitotsudaira! Ready, set, go!”

“Eh?”

Mitotsudaira’s eyebrows rose and she looked to Kimi. When Asama gave an approving nod, she glanced over but quickly turned back to Kimi.

“____________”

After some hesitation, she brought a hand to her forehead and answered.

“…Monster.”

Kimi nodded and looked to Asama.

“Boobs sniper.”

“Let’s narrow it down to one trait.”

“Boooobs!”

“You’re incorrigible… And don’t shout that.”

“Boooobs…”

“Whispering it doesn’t change anything, so just stop.”

“Oh, come on,” said Kimi before Asama looked to Mitotsudaira.

…*Now, then.*

Mitotsudaira cowered down when the other two girls looked her way.

“I-I am prepared for whatever you might say about me!”

"I'm not planning anything like that…"

At any rate, Asama needed a proper opinion, so she thought about it and gave a serious answer.

"Princess knight."

"My." Surprise filled Mitotsudaira's face. "I never thought you would say that, Tomo."

"You thought I was going to say something awful, didn't you!? Didn't you!?"

But then Kimi counted on her fingers as she went over the words they had come up with.

"Our band name is Monster Boobs Princess Knight! Weirdly, that just sounds like the title of a porn game! Porororrrrn!!"

"Ignoring that weird attempt at a sound affect, that title makes it sound more like Mito is in the lead."

"Can you not choose me as the lead of a porn game!?" Mitotsudaira lightly slapped one of the futons. "Our images for each other are just awful. Can't you two come up with something positive? Yes, let's all give a positive image of each other!"

"Okay," said Kimi as she looked to Mitotsudaira. "Faithful hound. …That's a positive image, right?"

"Kh," groaned Mitotsudaira, but she had set the rules and so she looked to Asama.

"Straitlaced."

"Good, good." Asama nodded and turned to Kimi. "Lunatic."

"Then our band name is the Faithful Hound Straitlaced Lunatics…"

"Wait, wait. That one isn't getting any complaints?"

"It sounds kind of like a tokusatsu title…"

Kimi stood up and bent forward. She held her right arm down and her left arm up behind her.

"The Faithful Hound Straitlaced Lunatics have arrived!"

Mitotsudaira and Asama applauded.

“If we’re willing to take it that far, it might just work.”

“Really!?” protested Mitotsudaira. “Are you serious!?”

“And why are you two trying to compete with me?” asked Kimi. “If that’s what you want, I’ll take you on! In other words, I rise to the challenge when a threesome presents itself! Know what I mean!?”

“Quiet down,” said Asama. “That should have been enough for you to get it out of your system, so let’s try to take this seriously now. Let’s give a nice image of each other this time. Got that?”

“A-and couldn’t we add ‘girls’ onto the end of it?” suggested Mitotsudaira.

“Faithful Hound Straitlaced Lunatic Girls.”

“That’s way too long!!”

“Calm down, Mito. We’re almost at the exit.”

Asama looked to Kimi.

…A nice image…

She felt like anything would be the right answer here and yet also the wrong answer, but she did her best.

“W-w-wi-wi-wise.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“O-of course I dooo. Why wouldn’t IIIII?”

“Tomo! Tomo! The wound is still shallow, so don’t force yourself!”

But Kimi turned to Mitotsudaira with a smile.

“Righteous.”

She said it simply and was done.

Mitotsudaira blushed and turned to Asama.

“…”

"L-let's not blush and fall silent, Mito!"

"Oh, u-um…"

Mitotsudaira looked at Asama with her golden eyes. And…

"Impur-…"

Asama was truly glad Mitotsudaira did not finish saying that. Then they communicated via eye contact.

…Okay, okay! We can't follow our usual habit of ending it on a joke!

…That's right! I thought it would be best to take this seriously for once!

…Heh heh heh. The difference between a normal person and an entertainer is whether or not they chicken out like that!

At any rate, Mitotsudaira gave another word.

"Devout."

I see, thought Asama before lining up the words.

"The Wise Devout Righteous Girls."

She tried saying it, but they all fell silent for around 10 seconds.

That one was heavy.

And after suffering through that stifling atmosphere…

"I can already imagine what will happen when we announce our band name: the entire theatre will fall silent except for our classmates who will fall out of their seats laughing. Does this mean I've been living my life wrong?"

"I will agree it sounds incredibly phony…" said Mitotsudaira.

"Doesn't it sound a lot like the name of a political campaign team?" asked Kimi.

Maybe it does, thought Asama as she took a breath and gathered strength in her gaze.

"Let's limit it to pretty words."

"Only pretty words? That sounds like it would work."

"What about things used to make things pretty?" asked Kimi.

"That's fine. As long as it's a tool of purification or cleaning."

They all nodded and gave their answers in the following order: Mitotsudaira, Asama, Kimi.

"White." "Ether." "Tissue."

They all fell silent. And after a while…

"White Ether on a Tissue? Is that a doujinshi?"

"Kimi! Kimi! That's going too far!"

"But I did hear Naruze say that, since ether is energy, it's useful for metaphors but you can't use it in a more literal sense. After all, it can become a mysterious phenomenon or even burn you in some cases."

Asama had a feeling their conversation was drifting off into the late night rules, so she got up.

"Tomo?"

"Oh, I thought I would make us something to eat."

After all…

"I have a feeling this is going to take a while if we're taking it seriously."

Two sets of wings walked along the underground corridor of a wide block at night.

The wings were gold and black. They were Naito and Naruze. They walked side by side, but neither was looking at the other.

Naruze was drawing a storyboard on the Magie Figur by her hands and Naito was listening to music from the Magie Figurs on her ears. Naruze was selecting the lines she wanted from two sketches of busty girls from Suzu's bathhouse placed three-dimensionally together and Naito was listening to a recording of everyone singing at the bathhouse.

Naruze could hear the music and voices, but…

"Margot?"

Her partner did not respond. Margot was staring forward with her eyebrows somewhat raised. But Naruze smiled a little at how the girl was crossing her arms.

…*She can be oddly manly at times.*

But…

"Margot."

Ever since parting ways with Marine earlier, her partner had been listening to the bath karaoke recording.

…*Bust karaoke! That could work!*

She jotted that idea down.

But then she spoke to the girl who looked somehow angry.

"Can you hear me?"

No response. So…

"Sorry about how I snapped back at Marine earlier. But…I couldn't stand it. She seemed to think we wouldn't even try to challenge her."

No response. So…

"Margot."

No response. So…

"You have sauce on your mouth."

"Eh? Really?"

She could hear her. But Naruze pulled a handkerchief out regardless.

"Margot, let me see your face."

"Judge, judge."

Naruze diverted the handkerchief away from the lips held out toward her.

The handkerchief had been a feint. She used her own lips instead. She placed her teeth on Naito’s lower lip and lightly bit down. Naito trembled in surprise, but she only pulled back a little bit.

She did not move away and that made Naruze happy.

“…”

Naruze then worked at eating the sauce on her partner’s lips.

With her lips around Naito’s lip, she could taste the girl’s flavor.

…Oh, green onion.

She laughed and so did Naito. Naito was probably tasting her garlic flavor, but as they swapped out their current selves…

“——————”

Naruze grabbed the Magino Figur on Naito’s right ear and placed it on her own left ear.

That allowed them both to listen to everyone’s music and singing with their left ear.

This is fun, thought Naruze. *I’m getting the sound meant for Margot’s right ear, but I’m listening to it with the same left ear as her.*

But while she focused on her ear, her lips were sealed. And there was one thing she could tell:

…Kimi is a step above everyone else.

That was an expert for you.

But at the same time, Mitotsudaira’s ability to use her voice like a musical instrument was pretty decent.

…However…

Asama sounded like she was having fun.

At times she got confused, tried too hard, got the lyrics wrong, or screwed up her timing, but she had an even better handle on it each time her turn came around.

Yes, thought Naruze.

Change was good.

It was fun sticking to the usual and being unstoppable, but to have something like *this* required change.

Technohexen were a symbol of change. Since ancient times, they had turned iron into gold, turned water into wine, and ignored the laws of all things to turn them into something else. And in doing so, they had made people richer and saved them.

And that was why they had been persecuted by the Catholics who preferred stability and hated change. But…

“Fweh fwah fwoh fwah fweh.”

“Ga-chan, don’t talk while biting my lip.”

I have to. You ate all the green onion ones earlier.

I’ll let you have the garlic, so let me have yours.

…Margot.

She could tell her partner was worrying over something.

She could hear it.

People who they could call their friends were changing in their own unique ways.

The music they each heard in their left ear was like a knock at the door symbolizing the arrival of everyone’s change.

Mitotsudaira was currently singing. Naruze had thought that half-werewolf was only playing at chivalry, but this song made it clear that she was seriously trying to run down that path despite immersing herself in it too much. She could seem to be full of herself, but that was no different from an entertainer.

Someone who did not think highly of herself could never get others to think the same and praise her.

…I think Kimi said that once.

Meanwhile, it seemed that their king was infatuated with a girl. But…

“__________”

No.

Some aspects of this were not certain, but if it was all “true” and they acted on it, things were going to get interesting. That idiot was like a living embodiment of actions speaking louder than words, so Mitotsudaira and Asama would have some difficult times ahead of them. Even if that idiot placed “her” by his side…

“Nn.”

When Naito embraced Margot, she could tell.

You could do more with people than have them “by your side”. And people had more than one “side”. Just like people had a right and left ear, there were open areas and each one had its own role. So…

…*Could it be?*

Naruze thought about Kimi. She did not go out of her way to speak with that girl. If anything, she kept her guard up lest she fall prey to that girl. But…

…*How far into the future is she looking?*

I might be mistaken about this, she decided even as she thought about the future and realized she was getting distracted.

“…Nn.”

I can’t be rude, thought Naruze as the flavor left her lips. And then she breathed a heated sigh.

“Delicious.”

“You’re welcome.”

They both laughed, but they did not let go of the music or each other. They were still right in front of each other when Naito spoke.

“…Maybe I’ve been conceited.”

Naito saw her partner close her eyes, leave her smile only on her lips, and open those lips to speak.

“We’ll be fine even if *that* happens.”

Then…

“…I’ve never gone on an adventure,” said Naito.

“Don’t worry. Neither have I.”

“…Should I give this my best shot?”

“I’ll be right there with you, so don’t worry.”

“Then,” said Naito. “Let’s beat Marine, kick Wild Kamelie’s butt, and become Edel Brocken testers.”

“Not ‘let’s try to’?”

“It’ll work out. Since we’re together.”

With a “judge”, Naito and Naruze held each other tightly and pressed their right cheeks together.

They used the vibration of each other’s skulls so their right ear could hear the music coming from the Magie Figur on the other’s left ear. And they also heard the other’s pulse from their temple.

“We’re hearing the same thing,” said Naito.

So…

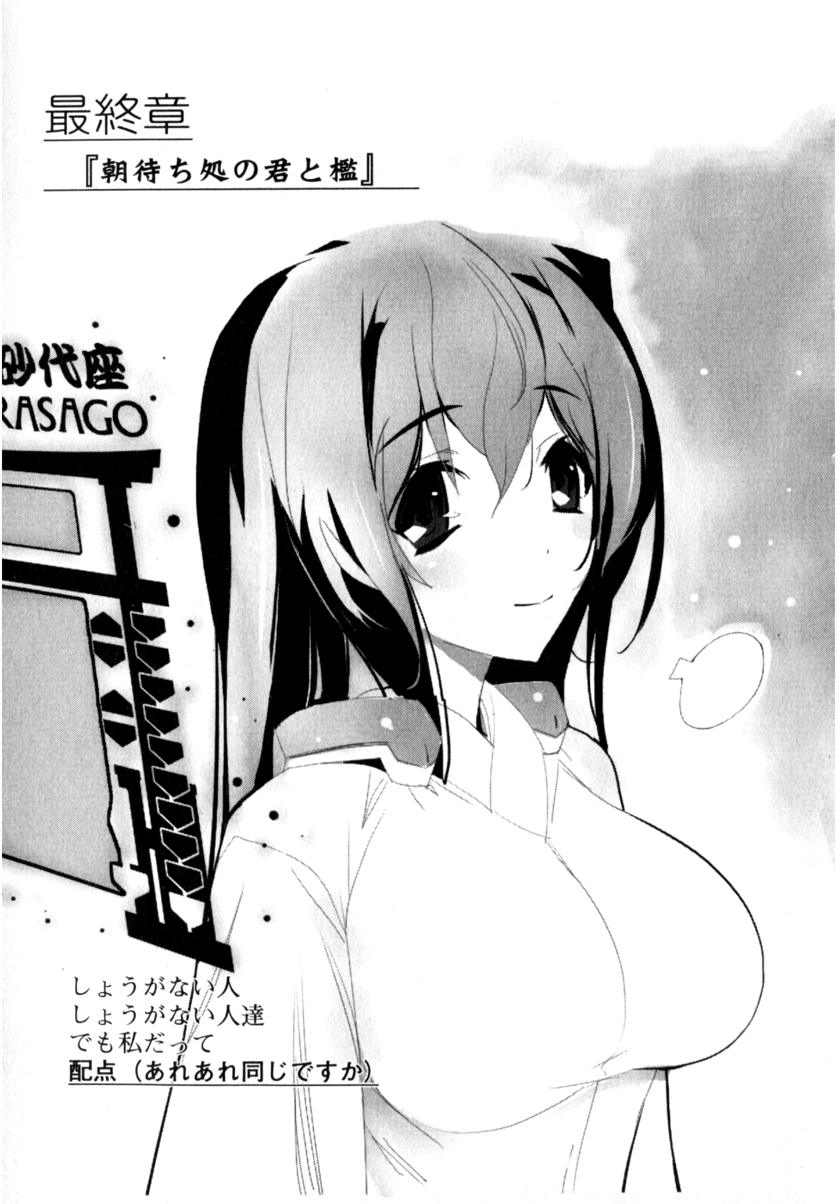
“Let’s reword that. Not *let’s* do all that.”

She once more embraced her precious partner as if letting the girl sink into her. And she felt the strength of Naruze accepting it and holding her tighter as well.

Then Naruze nodded and spoke as they rubbed their pulses together.

“We *can* do all that. So don’t worry.”

Last Chapter: You and a Cage while Waiting for Morning


最終章
『朝待ち処の君と檻』
砂代座
RASAGO
しょうがない人
しょうがない人達
でも私だって
配点（あれあれ同じですか）

A hopeless person

Hopeless people

But so am I

Point Allocation (Huh? Huh? I’m the same?)

“Nn…”

Asama opened her eyes to pull herself out of her doze.

Her vision was pointed down. *Oh, that’s not good,* she thought as she got up.

She pressed her palms against her cheeks to massage herself awake and she looked around.

The clock said it was 4 in the morning. She usually woke at 5 to begin her morning purification ritual.

And in the lit room, she saw Kimi and Mitotsudaira lying face down and looking dead just like she had been. They were sleeping on top of the blanket instead of below it.

…*I need to put a blanket over them.*

Asama considered going back to sleep after that, but then something occurred to her.

…*What happened last night?*

They had been sleeping facing a central point and a sign frame floated there. It was the Gagaku Festival form.

But the band name and song fields were still blank. A tentative registration was enough for the songs, but the band name was absolutely necessary.

“We never did come up with a good answer, so what am I supposed to do?”

I need a change of pace, she thought before standing up. She walked around a partition and used a sign frame to unlock the sliding door leading outside. She opened it to air out the room.

“——————”

And she stepped out.

Asama stood on the veranda. It was dark out, but the lights on the shrine's grounds created strongly contrasting shadows.

She was in her pajamas, but the chilly outside air felt nice. At night, only her father, anyone with permission, and the female members of the patrolling guards were allowed inside the Asama Shrine. Because they worshiped a goddess, they had a strictly enforced rule saying only women were allowed in the shrine grounds outside of normal hours. Even her father rarely went outside at night. He claimed Sakuya and the Ootsubaki-type would try to tempt him, but…

…*It's because mom might visit him.*

She wished he would let her mom visit him, but for a different emotional reason than when she was a child who had just lost her mother. However…

"Yes…"

Because they worshipped a goddess, the Asama succession gave priority to women. As a man, her father knew those difficulties well, so after losing her mother, he had worked to prevent that powerful mother's presence from affecting her.

He likely wanted to make sure no one could say her power was due to her mother's influence or involvement.

But…

…*It also means I still haven't reached mom's level.*

"…Mom."

Asama took a step forward and then continued walking. She walked across the abandoned grounds to the shrine.

"I hope I can become like you. Then I can support Musashi as the Shinto representative."

But…

"Would you be sad if I said I also wanted to live a life different from yours? Or would you be happy?"

There was no answer. Perhaps her mother was being considerate, just like how her father did not call for her mother. Or perhaps they no longer had that kind of connection. She had asked this question several times in the past, but…

…*Yes.*

There was no answer, so she would have to find meaning in this on her own.

“Hee hee.”

It’s always at night, she suddenly thought. That seemed to be when she felt different from normal and seemed enveloped by something like faintheartedness, nostalgia, or thoughtfulness.

But since it was night, she concluded she needed to head inside and get back to sleep. But then…

…*Noise?*

It came from overhead at the top of the atrium the Asama Shrine was built inside. She could only interpret it as shouting and gunshots and it was on the move.

From the bottom of the atrium, it came from the port side. Something was fleeing through the nature park there. And the guards were going all out pursuing it.

If a tracking sign frame was open in the sky overhead, the criminal would never escape. But when Asama saw the name in that sign frame, she opened a divine transmission sign frame of her own.

She input the settings to call the person in question.

“Toori-kun, what did you do?”

Hanami’s clap confirmed that Asama had a connection and a voice immediately followed.

“What!? I didn’t do anything! I was only about to do it! See, some Italian porn games arrived today from Aki! …Hey, Nobu-tan! That one’s a lost cause! Let’s get to the next place! Koni-tan, quit holding that box! You have to let go! We can only hope they go up for resale!”

He then said, “Oh, right.”

“If I’m caught by the guards, come by to sign for my release, okay!?”

“Again…?”

“Yeah. If you’re busy, send sensei by instead. Sending my sis would be dangerous, though.”

She was not particularly busy. And the guards were used to dealing with her. So…

“Understood. I can stop by on the way to school tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. Please do. You’re the only one I can ask about this.”

The phrase “convenient girl” briefly came to mind. After all, he was focused on another girl.

…Maybe I should just tell him to go ask her for help.

Why was it that she felt no intention whatsoever of telling him that? It was partially because his relationship with that girl did not seem very deep, but…

…What if “she” really is who we think she is?

In that case asking her would only make the situation worse. That was nearly certain. So…

“Yes, I suppose I am the only one you can ask.”

With both “him” and “her”, she felt like she was always the one being asked to do things. But…

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll make you something and bring it by later, okay?”

Why did that suddenly fill her with expectation? But they were close enough that he did not feel the need to apologize for something small like this and she felt like that was her special privilege. So…

“I’m used to it, so it’s fine, Toori-kun. I know this is just who you are.”

He’s such a hopeless person, thought Asama.

He was planning something big and he had not lost sight of that, but he could not do anything, he assumed she would help him out, and he was mostly entirely hopeless. But…

…He hasn't forgotten me and he pulls me along like it's normal.

She did not know where that would take her, but she had a feeling that ever-changing destination might just make their childhood dreams come true. So…

"If anything happens, just tell me. The Asama Shrine will support you."

"Yeah, thanks, thanks."

She had no idea if he really understood she was promising him support from Musashi's Shinto, but she would appreciate it if he did not.

She preferred it when he treated her as Asama Tomo and not the Asama Shrine Representative. After all…

…That means there's more to me than the Asama Shrine.

"Toori-kun."

"Eh? Oh, y-yeah, ahhhh! Sorry!! What was that!?"

"…Are you busy?"

"Well, the Shader husband was just blown away by a full charge hit from his wife, so our front line is falling apart. I'll probably be ready for your help in about 20 minutes."

Part of her felt like waiting until tomorrow morning to release him in order to teach him a lesson. But…

"Toori-kun."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for this evening."

"Eh? For what?"

"Oh, honestly," she said while opening a sign frame. It contained the ether supply records from when they had fought the Hidden

Dragons.

They had survived the charge from the second one, but that had clearly been more than just luck. So on Kimi's suggestion, she had checked the ether supply.

…Toori-kun gave me 30 Blessings.

Because she was in charge of his contract, they had an offering line used to exchange spells and the like, so he had used that to give her the Blessings.

The stealth barrier had been in the way, so her father had likely had a hand in it. And they had used the contract between her and him so it would not look like someone from the Asama Shrine had needed saving. In that way, she could even say he had saved the Asama Shrine itself.

But even if she explicitly mentioned it, he would only change the subject. That was just who he was. And…

…Does he think helping me out is perfectly normal too?

Then she was the same.

"Toori-kun."

"Oh? What?"

"Well… Feel free to continue pushing things onto me. I won't find it to be a nuisance."

"Sure. I plan to. I mean, that's what we've always done, right?"

"Right," she answered as a smile escaped onto her lips.

…This is a part of me I hope doesn't change.

He would probably try to be with "her", but he also indicated that his future with Asama would remain the same. So…

…I can continue on like this, can't I?

Oh, I really don't play fair, she thought a little.

After all, when it had become clear he was approaching another girl, Kimi had treated it like a problem and Mitotsudaira had clearly been angry, but he had given Asama an indication that their future would not change. That was not fair to the others. But…

"…"

Her smile grew as she thought to herself.

…What a hopeless person.

That was true of her and of him.

And it was probably true of them all.

They were truly hopeless people who were busy with their own issues but never forgot about the others and got them caught up in their own affairs.

And I'm turning into one of them, she thought just before she heard gunfire over the divine transmission.

"Sorry! I'm about to go secure an escape route for Nobu-tan and the others! Time to become a maaaaaaaaaaaaaan!"

"Have fun. When you get back, I'll give you the scolding of a lifetime."

He did not respond and the divine transmission cut off as things grew noisier overhead.

She looked up toward the nature park on the port side and her shoulders trembled in the night.

"What a hopeless person."

She needed to wrap this up here. She could think about their relative positions when another change inevitably arrived, so…

"Nn."

She stretched and turned her back on the night.

She returned to her room.

Asama slid the door shut, heard it automatically lock, and returned to her futon.

She kneeled down and started to climb under the blanket, but…

"Umm…"

She wanted to do something about the fact that the other two were sleeping on top of their blankets.

They would not get chilled with the heater on, but she did want to place a blanket over them.

The two of them had ended up sleeping right alongside each other, so a single blanket would probably suffice.

When they were sleeping, they did nothing stupid, said nothing weird, and did not force themselves too far. The others probably did not know Kimi slept with such a peaceful look on her face and Mitotsudaira was speaking in her sleep.

"Sniff. …Ah, a-a bone? I will not go fetch it if you throw it. N-no, don't throw it. A-ah, no, I won't l-lick you… Do you want me to?"

She seemed really into it, but was it a type of dirty dream?

…If I purified it away, would she be mad at me after she woke up?

Those two really helped me out today…or yesterday, I suppose it was.

But she had a feeling they would tell her not to worry about it. And Kimi would probably demand something in return, but taking that trickster's words at face value was meaningless. However, she did more or less understand one thing:

"If I enjoyed it and Kimi and Mito enjoyed it, then it wasn't an effort for any of us."

Did that mean she enjoyed taking care of him?

"Yeah…"

She tried not to think about it too deeply and nodded. Then she sat next to the sleeping pair.

"Thank you."

She could tell them that when they were awake, but she wanted to do it now.

Without them, she never would have changed like she had. That was also true of everyone she knew and who supported her from a distance, but these two had taken a much more active role.

“Thank you.”

She said it again and breathed a sigh of relief. Then the sleepiness suddenly hit her.

The gunfire had stopped outside, so the criminal had apparently been captured. She had to stop by the guard station the following morning, so she swallowed a yawn and decided to get to sleep.

Then she opened a sign frame and turned out the lights. The Gagaku Festival form’s sign frame still glowed in the center of the room, but it was like a nightlight. She could leave it be.

She sank down and started to put the futon’s blanket over her, but she decided the lighter blanket was enough.

She picked up her blanket, walked on her knees toward Kimi and Mitotsudaira, and looked at their sleeping faces.

…What do I look like when I’m asleep?

She could not see it for herself, but she meaninglessly decided the three of them could sleep alongside each other like this. And then…

“Kimi, Mito…”

She started to thank them again, but she stopped. She and those two had all enjoyed the day. So to line them all up together…

“Kimi, Mito, Asama…”

She suddenly realized something. Even if those two were already asleep tonight…

“We really are ‘Kimitoasamade’, aren’t we…?”[3]

She laughed and then wondered if that could be their band name.

So while looking at their faces, she typed it into the sign frame.

She decided to show it to them and get their opinion come morning.

Then she nodded and decided not to place a separate blanket over them.

Instead, she placed her blanket on her back, and crawled between them like a turtle.

Once she adjusted the position of her head, the three of them were lying alongside each other.

She took a breath, placed her blanket over the two of them, and held their hands below it.

She squeezed.

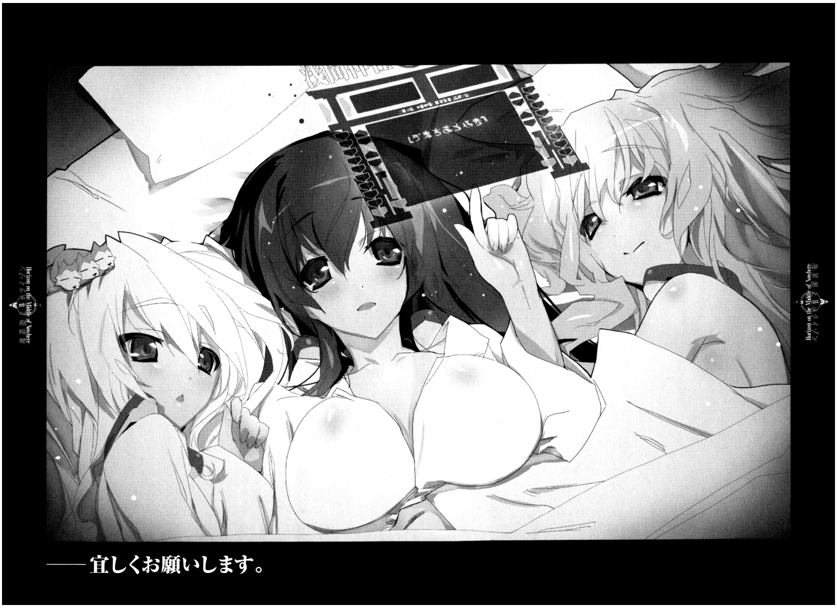
After a while, she felt them squeeze back. Mitotsudaira held tightly and Kimi clung lightly to her due to her habit of hugging things in her sleep.

Good, thought Asama.

In some cases, a date ended in the bedroom.

And if they could hold hands and embrace in there, then…

“It was a success.”



She did not regret this first date, so this had been a good day.

"Good night."

When she woke, it would be a new day. And that day would be as enjoyable as any other.

—I look forward to working with you.

Afterword

That was bonus novel Kimitoasamade 2-B. It's thanks to all of you that I could do something like this. Thank you very much.

With 2-B, everything is set up for the preparations(?). The bonus novels for the 2nd season will begin on the following morning and have everything moving toward the spring school festival.

As you can see from the events so far, they were already prepared when the main series began, so their position a year before that is quite complex.

In the main series, they are 3rd years, which is something of a completed product, and they were ready to head out into the world with Toori and the others. So what were their relationships and situations like a year beforehand?

Everyone experiences these times of remaking or reorganizing themselves. In modern terms, I suppose it's like the gap between your 2nd and 3rd year of college. (There's less of a sense of a "higher level" than there is in high school, so I think that's how it would seem to Far Eastern residents who would come of age at 15.) That's when you start thinking about your occupation, romances that might lead to marriage, and your other relationships. But at this point, Toori isn't the Chancellor or Student Council President and he's only a mid-level entertainer who gathers the attention of the people around him. Similarly, their usual gathering place isn't on the bridge. It's at Suzu's bathhouse run for students or at somewhere else.

In a way, they aren't sure if they should let themselves worry about everything or if they can believe in their former dreams. I hope we can see what happens to them next as well as the silly situations that will happen unrelated to that.

And with that, it's time for the usual chat.

"Did you buy the BD?"

"I did."

"Thank you very much for your purchase."

“So this thing’s a Blu-ray? I can’t watch that.”

“With some practice, you can read the disk’s grooves yourself. I think most of the big boobs are on the outer edge. The inside has the flat chests.”

“I doubt it, but can a PSP read it?”

“It physically can’t, so just go buy a PS3 and play some Monster Hunter.”

Now, my background music was the demo version of ZONE//ALONE, the second season’s OP. It doesn’t have the vocals yet, but I think you might be able to listen to the finished product by the time this bonus novel reaches you.

Anyway, the next Kimitoasamade will come with Season 2 Volume 1, so wait a bit. The manuscript is actually already done, so I think it should reach you without delay.

April 2012. A morning without pollen.

-Kawakami Minoru

Notes

1. ↑ The Tada of Tadayo can be read as Chuu.
2. ↑ Chuuko can mean “used”.
3. ↑ Kimitoasamade contains all 3 of their names and can be interpreted to mean “With You Until Morning”.

Kyoukai Senjou no Horizon - Kimitoasamade - Volume 02-B

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